

Wrestling Observer Newsletter

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NEW JAPAN NEW BEGINNINGS IN OSAKA

Thumbs up 107 (81.1%)

Thumbs down 0 (00.0%)

In the middle 25 (18.9%)

BEST MATCH POLL

Katsuyori Shibata vs. Tomohiro Ishii 129

WORST MATCH POLL

Tenzan & Kojima vs. Nakanishi & Nagata 45

Bullet Club vs. Briscoes & Yano 32

NEW BEGINNINGS IN NIIGATA

Thumbs up 117 (100.0%)

Thumbs down 0 (00.0%)

In the middle 0 (00.0%)

BEST MATCH POLL

Kenny Omega vs. Hiroshi Tanahashi 107

Kushida vs. Bushi 9

WORST MATCH POLL

Bucks & Hall vs. Liger & Tiger Mask & Captain 38

Briscoes & Yano vs. Bullet Club 32

Based on phone calls and e-mails to the Observer as of Tuesday, 2/16.

World Wrestling Entertainment released its 2015 financials, ending the year with a record setting \$658,776,000 in revenue, and a far from record setting \$24,144,000 in profits.

Those numbers compare favorably with \$542,620,000 in revenue in 2014 and \$30,072,000 in losses in 2014. The turnaround is largely because the network is in its second year and doesn't have the first year start-up costs and the period of first building subscribers numbers. In addition, WWE's television rights fees worldwide increased from \$176,700,000 in 2014 to \$231,100,000, of which \$35,100,000 was in additional profit from the prior year.

The company's business at this point is built around rights fees and network revenues. Rights fees, based on current contracts, will continue to increase over the next few years. They are a fixed total not dependent upon how creative or interest levels are doing currently. Obviously when current contracts are up, at that point interest levels and ratings will be key factors in new negotiations, as will the big picture state of the television industry.

Network revenues are also growing, although at a far slower pace than the company projected and Wall Street expected.

After the annual figures were released on 2/11, even though the news was far more positive than negative, it was the decline in WWE Network subscribers that offset most of the positive news and stock dropped below \$15 per share within a few days. It picked up to \$15.36 at press time, giving the company a \$1.17 billion market value.

Profits are still trailing the pre-network levels of \$32 million to \$53 million between 2003 and 2010. The profit margins decreased in 2011 as they started spending to launch the network, and that's with a huge escalation in television rights fees.

The profit margin couldn't cover the dividend payout for the year of \$36,334,408, so the company's actual cash on its balance sheets decreased from \$115,413,000 at the end of 2014 to \$102,476,000 at the end of 2015.

But most aspects of business were stronger as far as revenue went, with the exception of a major decline in home video revenue. But that's a category, like PPV, that was going to be hurt by the network.

Television ratings declined significantly, which has become a hotly debated topic between those who believe the ratings are down due to a less interesting product and those who believe all television has declined and WWE's decline just mirrors the television industry, and that with Hulu and YouTube viewership that it offsets the ratings decline.

The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. Raw hasn't declined as much as other programming on the USA Network, but that's because the network has declined significantly as compared with other networks. Raw's year-to-year decline is greater than any of the major sports, some of which, like baseball, hockey and MMA, showed significant increases over the past year.

Another negative on the Raw rating is the third hour decline, when historically the 10-11:05 p.m. hour had always been the highest rated. That can't be blamed on people consuming it in other fashions, because the decline is of people who were watching the show and then tuned out as the show went on.

That said, aside from the money losing movie division, and declines in home video and PPV, the latter two of which can be attributed to the network gaining more subscribers, the other revenue

streams were up for the year.

Key barometers like house show attendance ended up virtually identical year-to-year. In North America, the company averaged 6,000 paid per live event in 2014 and 2015. They did show an increase overseas from 6,200 average paid per show to 7,300. The increase was due to the opening of some new larger arenas in Europe and better performance in some markets including Japan. But house show business has become more profitable, largely due to increasing the ticket prices on the premium seat end. In 2014, the average price paid for a WWE ticket in North America during the year was \$48.86, and in 2015 that was raised to \$53.22.

But all forms of merchandising were up, with the average money spent on merchandise at the arenas increasing from \$9.58 per head in 2014 to \$10.54 per head in 2015. Generally speaking, merchandise sales are an indicator of how over the top talent is, while house show attendance is more these days based on brand power with minor swings based on John Cena or Roman Reigns being advertised.

What we've learned about the network and increasing social media is that both have no effect at all on ratings. Network and social media numbers are way up while ratings across the board are down. They don't seem to have an effect on house shows, since those numbers are identical. The television revenue being up has nothing to do with any outside marketing forces past that right now stations are willing to spend more for the programming. But nobody knows how the television industry will change. If consumers move from traditional television to streaming, and television stations don't have the money they once had, that will have a major effect on the company. By far, the company's leading source of revenue and profits is television rights fees.

There were questions from analysts that if WWE's television shows are being consumed in new forms, through streaming, whether that's a good thing since they make virtually no money from that, and make hundreds of millions from television, and thus the streaming weakening the ratings, if that's even the case, could financially be cutting their throats in the next round of negotiations. Increased streaming of content greatly lessens the value of the television product, and television stations would prefer product exclusivity within their market.

Perhaps in a few years there will ways to more greatly monetize streaming the content. From a pure exposure standpoint, WWE is ahead of the curve long-term, but from an economic standpoint, the jury is very much out. A lot of stock analysts were not impressed with Vince McMahon's response when he was asked about the significant decline in ratings in the fourth quarter. Analyst Mike Hickey asked about the decline and said he considered the television business as the life blood of the company.

"As far as the ratings are concerned, number are down, but not as much as the networks in general that we are on," said Vince McMahon. "I think you see a decline in a lot of the networks in general because people are not watching television as much (Editor's note: The overall time the average person spends watching traditional television is almost identical to one year ago but there are changes and types of programming that are declining, but historically with television there have always been swings in different types of categories that get hot and then burn out) and some capacity is online or things of that nature. So George (Barrios) mentioned the ecosystem, it's extremely important for us to be able to do television, and television is sort of the old media, and

not that it is not important to us, it's extremely important. When you add in all the YouTube you have, all the digital you have, and all the social, our audience is consuming our product in the way that they want to and when they want to and that's important for us to be able to do that. So it's not just about television ratings anymore

We are not looking at it that way of old school. We are looking at it from the standpoint of a total ecosystem, which as you can see is extremely strong for us. It is not just about television ratings, which we used to be before new media. You used to live and die by it."

Everyone is waiting for the sports rights fees bubble to burst, and there have been signs of it in some recent college sports deals. The NFL's recent Thursday deal with two networks showed the networks are willing to pay more than ever, but that's also the NFL. Perhaps competition with digital getting more powerful will strengthen WWE's position. If digital services don't start paying at the rate television does, that won't be the case. And if they can't monetize the product the way television can, not just through advertising but through being paid by cable operators and satellite services for transmission fees, they won't have the money to compete with television. And if television gets less money from transmission fees because people stop subscribing to cable and satellite services, and viewership declines leading to ad revenue declines, television won't have the money it has to spend on programming at the same rate as in the future.

On 12/31, the WWE Network had 939,900 subscribers listed as being from the U.S., 277,200 subscribers listed as being from outside the U.S. There were also 55,000 subscribers with access who got in through ordering a free month. On 9/31, those numbers were 990,200 listed as being from the U.S., 242,900 listed as being from outside the U.S., and 73,000 with access to the network through getting it for a free month. The only additional new market in the fourth quarter was India, but because the network started as a U.S. only, the U.S. number is two full years in and "more mature" while the international numbers are for a later starting business, they are still in more of a ramp up period.

Still, even though it was right after Christmas, there were more subscribers on 9/30 than 12/31 overall, and the decline was entirely in the U.S.

It was the decline in the U.S. and overall subscriber number from three months earlier that was a major concern and the key reason the stock fell, along with a little uncertainty about the ratings drop.

It should be noted that WWE in its early projections, they had predicted by this point the network would have 2 million network subscribers in the U.S. and 500,000 outside the U.S., and that they would destroy all previous profit records in 2015, so they were far below projections.

Another key is that the international numbers increased by opening up foreign markets. The U.S. decline came even though it was Christmas, when consumer spending is way up, and during a period where WWE Network gift cards showed up in major retail establishments like WalMart. There was some belief that network numbers were held down because they have a lower economic fan base that didn't have credit cards, but with cash, would purchase gift cards. In addition, the gift cards made for convenient Christmas presents to wrestling fans. Neither happened and that theory turned out to be completely incorrect. In addition, even though domestic network subscribers were down, PPV numbers were also way down for Survivor Series and TLC after stronger than expected

numbers from May through October.

Survivor Series only did 17,000 domestic PPV buys, while TLC fell to 14,000, the lowest in history. Most PPV orders are from outside North America (as categorized as U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico), as Survivor Series did 50,000 international orders and TLC did 45,000.

So there absolutely was a decline in interest in the product and the big shows since the Hell in a Cell show.

What we've learned from the past year is that the network shows great growth from January through WrestleMania. At that point the numbers decline, although slowly.

At the end of 2014, the network had 772,000 domestic subscribers and 44,000 outside the U.S. That 816,000 total grew to 1,327,000 as of two days after WrestleMania (1,131,000 registered in the U.S. and 196,000 registered outside the U.S.). Of that gain of 511,000 during Mania season, the numbers declined some, but not that much, after. U.S. numbers declined 17 percent from two days after WrestleMania until the end of the year, but some of that decline is also people from other countries who could get it legally in their country now being registered in their country. We had been told from company sources as well as those very familiar with the numbers that they were well aware this was going to happen.

The gain would likely not be as much this year, but when WWE gives its next network number, which will be the day after WrestleMania, it should by all rights hit 1.5 to 1.6 million (a similar gain as last year would get the number to 1,728,000), and they probably can keep it from there at around 1.4 million to 1.5 million for the rest of the year. The company made no predictions about the numbers for WrestleMania, but did project, and in mid-February given last year's numbers they can project pretty accurately, that the average daily subscriber number for the first quarter would be in the range of 1,280,000 subscribers.

But the WrestleMania seasonal gain probably won't be as much. Last year, when the free month was new, WWE was getting 200,000 new subscribers based on free months and keeping about 150,000 of them. Now, because they've went to the well with free months for so long, those numbers are way down, so that would indicate lesser Mania growth this year. In addition, because there are more subscribers, the room for growth is less, because there is no indication anywhere that there are more wrestling fans.

The company actually lost money in the fourth quarter, generating \$166.2 million in revenue but ending with a \$1.2 million loss. The prior year the number was \$140.5 million in revenue and a \$1.6 million loss.

However, the losing money aspect is a little misleading. The company is including a loss of \$7.1 million to write off costs of an abandoned media center expansion project. They had started spending money on the project years ago, but then made the decision the new media center wasn't economically feasible with the changes in how they are doing business. If you factor that off the books, this past quarter would have had a \$3.4 million profit

The company is projecting somewhere between \$9 million and \$13 million in profits for the first quarter of 2016.

We'll break down the numbers more in next week's issue.

Moody's released a new report on UFC giving information regarding its last fiscal year.

Unlike with WWE, which records January through December, UFC's fiscal year is October through September, so the new report covers October 1, 2014 through September 30, 2015. The key is that missed the last three PPV shows of the year, which included UFC 193 and UFC 194, both of which did in excess of one million buys.

The total revenue for that period was \$535 million and EBITDA (not exactly, but essentially profits before taxes) was about \$132 million. Lorenzo Fertitta has stated publicly that the total revenues for 2015, including the two big PPV shows, topped \$600 million.

Of that \$132 million, somewhere in the range of \$22 million to \$24 million would be the annual interest on outstanding loans (which are \$467 million). Also in the report, it listed that during the period, the company paid out \$51 million in interest payments from the large profits. Given the ownership breakdown of 40.5% owned by Lorenzo Fertitta, 40.5% owned by Frank Fertitta, 10% owned by Flash Entertainment and 9% by Dana White, that would approximate dividend payouts of \$20,655,000 to each Fertitta Brother, \$5,100,000 to Flash and \$4,590,000 to White.

The approximate dividend payout the previous year would have been \$17,820,000 to each Fertitta Brother, \$4,400,000 to Flash and \$3,960,000 to White.

EBITDA was in the \$110 million range for the 2012-2013 fiscal year and \$66 million for the 2013-2014 year, due to the weak PPV business the prior year.

The report, which was compiled by the Bloody Elbow web site, also listed that this past year saw increases in every key revenue stream, including tickets sold, an increase in the average ticket price, growth in Fight Pass, as well as increases in both U.S. and international television rights fees.

The report also gave a strong outlook for future growth. While it is highly unlikely PPV revenue in 2016 will be close to that of 2015. Ronda Rousey will fight at most once, if at all, and she was the biggest draw. Conor McGregor, the other top draw, headlined two PPV shows in 2015 and, barring injury, will probably headline three in 2016. But his drawing power to a degree depends on the results of his fights.

However, the 2015-2016 fiscal year numbers will be stronger because they will include UFC 193 and UFC 194, as well as UFC 196, 197 and 200, which are all expected to do big numbers.

There is also a new video game coming out this year, and current contracts call for increases in domestic television rights fees from FOX, as well as a contract with PPV providers which will give the company a higher percentage of revenue splits this year. There is also expectation of good growth this year from Fight Pass, given it being a higher priority and the company pushing stronger live fights and more live content.

But it also noted that UFC is very much talent dependent, especially in PPV where the divergence of numbers between the big and small shows is more than ever before.

Still, UFC did show in 2014, when it had a slew of injuries, and had lost Anderson Silva and

Georges St-Pierre, the top two PPV draws, while at the same time Rousey and McGregor hadn't reached their 2015 levels, that even with a 13 percent decline in revenues and 44 percent decline in EBITDA, that they remained a very profitable company.

Kevin "The Monster" Randleman, who passed away on 2/12 from heart failure while on a business trip in San Diego, may have been the best all-around athlete ever to compete in the UFC.

Randleman, the fifth holder of the UFC heavyweight championship, was 44. He was voted by the Touchdown Club at Ohio State University as the greatest wrestler of the 20th century in the history of the school, where he was inducted into the school's Athletic Hall of Fame in 2004.

He was a three-sport star at Sandusky High School in Ohio, where he went to the state finals in track, was state champion at 160 pounds in wrestling, and started four years in football.

But it's not the on-paper credentials that made him a freak athlete, as much as watching him. The young Randleman had a ridiculous physique, competing at 5-foot-10 and 228 pounds when he was UFC heavyweight champion for one year. He had the type of frame and large muscle bellies that would make a competitive bodybuilder jealous. He had a small waist, huge shoulders, arms and legs. But his muscles functioned athletically, as opposed to being simply looking impressive. Before his fights, he'd wow the audience jumping high into the air while warming up, with his massive thighs looking like somebody inserted springs in them.

While he was an early UFC heavyweight champion, his two most memorable fights were undoubtedly in Pride, in 2004, a win over Mirko Cro Cop and a loss to Fedor Emelianenko in that year's Pride heavyweight Grand Prix tournament.

In the former, on April 25, 2004, at a sold out Saitama Super Arena, Randleman, a heavy underdog feigned a takedown. He then came over the top with a left hook, which knocked Cro Cop silly. He then finished him with punches on the ground in just 1:57.

Cro Cop was the most popular foreign fighter in Pride at the time, and the tournament was put together to build to a Cro Cop vs. Emelianenko showdown. Randleman's left hook spoiled those plans and delayed that match by a year.

Still, there have been far bigger upsets in the sport's history. What led to this leaving such an indelible mark were Randleman's reactions and the English call of the match by Mauro Ranallo.

A stunned Ranallo screamed, like an announcer calling the winning shot at the buzzer in the seventh game of the NBA finals, "Kevin Randleman has knocked out Mirko Cro Cop! The Monster has knocked out Mirko Cro Cop! Kevin Randleman has knocked out Mirko Cro Cop."

Ranallo, who has called some of the biggest boxing matches, MMA fights and pro wrestling matches in recent years, noted that as what he may be most remembered for.

"I'm stunned and deeply saddened at the passing of Kevin Randleman," wrote Ranallo on Twitter. "He was responsible for the most memorable call of my 30-year-career."

Immediately after knocking Cro Cop out, as a confused Cro Cop recovered, Randleman went over to console him and kissed him on the side of the face.

Randleman then told the audience, “If you did not think I was scared coming out here fighting this man, you are wrong. I’m human, just like everybody. But I’ll go to Hell and back to fight for you guys.”

With the health issues he suffered over the next few years, he in fact, did go to Hell and back, and continued to fight.

Randleman, who has lived in Las Vegas for years, had complained of shortness of breath and flu-like symptoms, and then collapsed on Thursday. Paramedics transported him to Tri-City Medical Center in Oceanside, where medical staff performed advanced cardiac life support measures, but Randleman didn’t recover and pronounced dead due to heart failure.

The news shocked the MMA community, as since this is a young sport, the community has only rarely had to deal with deaths. Randleman is only the second champion in UFC history to have passed away, the other being former middleweight champion Evan Tanner, more than seven years ago when he is from heat exposure while in the desert.

After the Cro Cop win, Randleman’s next fight, eight weeks later, at the same Saitama Super Arena, was against Emelianenko in the loaded tournament. Randleman picked the Pride champion up and delivered a twisting back suplex, dropping him almost on his head. Despite the move looking like it could have broken Emelianenko’s neck, he was actually unharmed, and just seconds later had submitted Randleman with a Kimura. But it’s as devastating looking a throw as took place in Pride during that era. It created the story of the “Randle-plex,” which became part of the myth of Emelianenko from taking the move and then recovering and submitting his foe less than a minute later.

And that really told the story of Randleman’s MMA career, which ended in 2011 with a 17-16 record. The record is misleading as Randleman was a major force in the sport through the end of 2002, but went 3-11 over the next nine years.

There were a number of issues that plagued the latter part of his career. There were issues with the sport evolving, as Randleman often fell victim to submissions in fights he was winning, and even more later on in his career, an assortment of health issues.

He had a serious lung infection in 2005, and followed with kidney problems and a terrible staph infection over the next few years. He also had an assortment of injuries. He failed a drug test after a 2006 fight with Mauricio “Shogun” Rua, where his test submitted to the Nevada State Athletic Commission contained no hormones, so essentially it was fake urine, which resulted in a suspension.

Bas Rutten fought Randleman in what was probably Randleman’s third most famous fight, a UFC title bout in 1999, and later became best friends with him.

“For some reason, you don’t want to believe this,” wrote Rutten in a Facebook tribute. “I mean, this is a guy who survived everything, like his head got split open and a car, a truck, landed on him which he pushed simply off. He had a staph infection that was too crazy to look at. I mean he had a hole in his chest, like a circle two inches wide and more than an inch deep.”

Randleman was a personable guy, who even through all his health issues always seemed upbeat and

jovial.

Randleman was the second youngest boy in a family of 11 children.

“For me, I wrestled, and it was definitely a vehicle for getting me out of bad situations which I would have been in,” Randleman said.

After winning the Ohio high school wrestling championship in 1989, finishing his high school career with a 122-11 record, Randleman went to Ohio State University. You could make a strong case he was the greatest wrestler ever to attend the college until Logan Steiber and Kyle Snyder came to Columbus in recent years.

Randleman posted a 108-7-3 record as a Buckeye, a record that included scoring four of the ten fastest pins in school history.

In 1991, as a freshman, competing at 167 pounds, he won the Big 10 title and placed second in the NCAA tournament.

As a sophomore, in 1992, he went 42-0-3. He scored three pins, two in less than one minute, in winning the NCAA tournament at 177 pounds.

He was plagued by injuries as a junior, suffering both a broken jaw and a torn knee ligament that he competed with. But he still missed only limited time and only lost once.

In his second match in the 1993 NCAA tournament, against Mark Frushone of Central Connecticut, he suffered a dislocated jaw. In an amazing case of grit and determination, he popped the jaw back in place and continued the match. With the injury, he won four more matches and became the first two-time national champion in Ohio State wrestling history.

But Randleman said that he couldn't deal with the pressure. He stopped going to class, making him ineligible for his senior year. Even though he had Olympic potential, he never wrestled another match.

Mark Coleman, who was a member of the 1992 Olympic team, was an assistant wrestling coach while Randleman was there. When Coleman failed to make the 1996 team at 220 pounds, in the spot won by Kurt Angle, who ended up winning a gold medal, Coleman started in the UFC that summer.

In a 2013 interview with MixedMartialArts.com, Randleman described his entree into MMA in 1996.

“I was sitting at home in Sandusky, Ohio, and I had my oldest son, Calvin, with me, and we were watching the WWE SummerSlam or something,” he said. “Mark Coleman called me and asked me if I wanted to fight, and I said, ‘Nah, not really.’ And then he said, ‘\$30,000.’ So I said, ‘Oh s***, who I go to kill?’ He said, ‘No, you just got to win three fights in one night.’ Well, that’s what we used to do in college. We fought a lot. It’s not like we fought on campus, but we would go off campus and I literally fought every weekend.”

Randleman showed up as part of Coleman's entourage in Augusta, Ga., on September 20, 1996. Coleman won his first two fights in an eight-man tournament and due to injuries, there was nobody left to face him in the finals.

Coleman called Randleman in the ring and the two did a wrestling exhibition for the live audience in lieu of the tournament championship fight, throwing each other all over the place.

Word quickly spread that the guy with the bleached blond hair who was even more muscular than Coleman was one of the nation's most dominant college wrestlers a few years earlier.

Armed with little more than his wrestling skills and some street fighting techniques, Randleman went to Brazil a month later, this time with Coleman in his corner. Randleman took three opponents down and punched them in the head until two submitted and a third was knocked out to win a tournament on October 22, 1996.

Once Coleman signed with Pride, UFC brought in Randleman in 1999 as part of a four-man tournament to crown the heavyweight champion after Randy Couture had left over a contract issue.

He made a statement in his debut with Maurice Smith on March 5, 1999. Smith was a former world champion in kickboxing, who had upset Coleman in 1997 to become UFC heavyweight champion, before dropping it to Couture.

The idea that Randleman would outwrestle Smith and take a decision wouldn't have been a surprise. And that was largely the story of the fight. But a lot of the fight was standing, and even with limited technique, Randleman was able to stand with Smith without getting hurt.

This put him in the tournament finals on May 7, 1999, in Birmingham, Ala., against Rutten, in a fight heavily debated to this day.

Randleman took Rutten down and destroyed him on the ground for the first five minutes of the fight, breaking Rutten's nose and cutting him up badly. Randleman kept him down the majority of the rest of the fight, but didn't do any significant damage over the last 16 minutes.

Rutten did more damage than Randleman after the five minute mark, even though he was on his back most of the fight, throwing elbows which cut Randleman up. But Randleman did far more damage in the early minute than Rutten did the remainder of the fight. At the time, with no rounds, judges only ruled on who won the fight overall. Visually, it looked like Randleman had destroyed Rutten. Two of the three judges, who evidently broke the fight up into rounds like they were doing boxing, voted for Rutten.

Rutten noted that the two met for the first time in the hotel the day before their fight.

"I am by myself, the door opens, and there is Kevin, also by himself," Rutten wrote. "I get in with him, the door closes and there is this awkward moment. We both look at each other and smile. I tell Kevin, 'Well, good luck tomorrow.' He says, 'Thank you, you too.'"

Randleman then joked to him, saying, "If you don't kick me, I won't take you down." Rutten said, he responded, saying, "Okay, that's a deal."

Of course, in the fight, Rutten kicked him and Randleman took him down. But the two became great friends after spending time together the day after the fight, where they compared all their various cuts and stitches.

Rutten noted it was Randleman who came up with his nickname, "El Guapo."

Rutten retired after that fight due to an assortment of injuries, although he did fight once more many

years later.

Randleman then won a five-round decision over Pete Williams on November 19, 1999, at Tokyo Bay NK Hall, to capture the vacant UFC heavyweight championship. What's notable about that fight is it was the first UFC heavyweight championship fight fought with five-minute rounds and modern style round-by-round judging. Randleman retained the championship, beating Pedro Rizzo, before losing via third round stoppage on November 17, 2000, in Atlantic City, N.J., to a returning Couture.

He remained with UFC until early 2002. He dropped to light heavyweight, but was knocked out by Chuck Liddell, but then got a decision win from Renato Babalu Sobral in his last UFC fight.

"Short and sweet, I was in jail," Randleman said the MixedMartialArts.com interview. "It was baby mama drama. She wasn't a very good mother and I loved my boy. I was in jail because I told the judge off. I was never known for my patience. I think Dana White would have understood, but cell phones weren't like they are now. When I got arrested, had like two seconds. And then I was in jail for 35 days. I didn't have any numbers whatsoever and none of my people had any numbers. When I got back, I called Mark (Coleman) and Mark said that I got released."

He moved to Pride in Japan that year, where he was a regular until the promotion closed, and later fought for Strikeforce.

While fighting for Pride, he also dabbled in pro wrestling, a venture that if he had the right breaks in, he had potential to be a major star in. Randleman had tremendous potential for pro wrestling, considering his physique, look, athletic ability and he had a natural charisma and talked well.

He did pro wrestling in Japan throughout the Pride years, often in a tag team with Coleman, or another former NCAA champion wrestler, Sylvester "The Predator" Terkay, at times in high profile matches. With his leaping ability, he could do amazing things in the ring when it came to leap frogs and a variety of flying moves off the top rope to go along with suplexes. In 2007, with the Hustle promotion, he played a masked super hero called Randle Man, while Coleman wore a mask as Cole Man. But he came at a time when American promotions were not actively recruiting top athletes like they are today, and he never wrestled in the U.S.

"Behind the man was a gentle soul and loyal friend who will be missed by many and who loved him behind the cage," said his wife Elizabeth Broglia in a statement. "The Ohio State University, UFC, MMA and Sandusky, Ohio communities share in the loss of Kevin's passing. Life without The Monster will never be the same."

Randleman had four children.

In recent years, Randleman had helped start a non-profit amateur wrestling academy in Las Vegas, and did acting and worked as a personal trainer.

Every year there are a lot of great matches, but it is very rare when an individual match has major long-term repercussions.

In the last 35 years, there are only a handful that come to mind, in the sense they either made a new superstar instantaneously at a time when one was needed, or they changed a region economically.

This past weekend, a match where Kenny Omega won the vacant IWGP Intercontinental title beating Hiroshi Tanahashi at the 2/14 New Beginnings in Niigata PPV show may be added to this list.

*Eddie & Mike Graham vs. Dusty Rhodes & Pak Song on May 14, 1974 at the Fort Homer Hesterly Armory in Tampa. This was the match where Rhodes turned babyface and for the next several months, the Florida promotion was the hottest it ever was, and Rhodes became the area's top babyface for the next dozen years, and his popularity extended internationally. Rhodes was already a headliner as a heel for years before this match.

*Ric Flair vs. Ricky Steamboat at the WRAL Studios in Raleigh on June 15, 1977 for the Mid Atlantic television title. Steamboat at the time was a prelim wrestler who Flair did the original Rocky movie shtick of being the arrogant top heel star offering a title shot to an unknown. Steamboat won the title, and while that kind of upset is age-old booking, Steamboat became an instant main eventer, a status he carried for much of the rest of his career. This didn't do instant business nor turn the territory around, but Steamboat came out of it with a program with Flair that did well. The first run drew nothing special, but Flair vs. Steamboat was brought back many times. A second run between the two did well. They didn't turn a territory around but they were key building blocks in Mid Atlantic Championship Wrestling becoming the top regional territory for many years, and both for selling tickets and match quality, it's generally considered the best singles program ever in that part of the country.

*Ric Flair vs. Kerry Von Erich on December 25, 1982, a cage match for the NWA title at Reunion Arena in Dallas, is one of the prototypes. While both were already top stars, this one match led to turning the territory around. Special referee Michael Hayes and gatekeeper Terry Gordy turned on Von Erich shortly after David Von Erich had teamed with both of them as a replacement for Buddy Roberts who had "transportation issues," and won the fall for team. David vacated his third of the six-man title to Roberts, saying that it was the right thing to do. This all led to the Freebirds vs. Von Erichs run, which led to the popularity of wrestling in the area to skyrocket. It made The Freebirds into top heels, led to weekly sellouts on Friday and huge big show business, a strong run through 1983 and 1984 which led to several of the most well remembered live events, ridiculous ratings and hottest period for wrestling in that part of the country.

*Ric Flair vs. Sting on March 27, 1988, a 45:00 draw on the first Clash of Champions at the Greensboro Coliseum, was notable for a few reasons. Sting was a mid-card babyface. There was no doubt he had charisma, but he was way down on the pecking order. Because of the spotlight, the very first Clash of Champions, the main event on the Crockett Promotions answer to WrestleMania head-to-head, and the match quality, Sting came out of the match as a shooting star. He was clearly the rising star of the business in the U.S., and with the exception of Hulk Hogan, he may have come out of it as the most popular wrestler in the U.S. In addition, the ratings the show delivered led to the Clash of the Champions becoming, instead of a one-time counter to WrestleMania, becoming a quarterly big show, which set the stage for major TV specials. But when it came to business, this didn't have a significant impact. In actuality, Crockett business declined after this match and Sting was, even after this match, not the level of draw as a Flair opponent of people like Lex Luger or Dusty Rhodes.

*Jumbo Tsuruta vs. Mitsuharu Misawa on June 8, 1990, a match at Budokan Hall, fits this more

than almost anything. Misawa had been a solid “B” babyface as the masked Tiger Mask. In a sense, while he was a great wrestler, he didn’t have the charisma or flashiness to live up to the legend that Satoru Sayama had created in his 1981-83 heyday. All Japan was a very strong company, but suddenly, it got raided of some of its key talent, most notably Genichiro Tenryu, the Great Kabuki and Yoshiaki Yatsu, by the upstart Super World Sports promoted by billionaire Hachiro Tanaka. Giant Baba needed to create a native star who could be the top rival to Tsuruta, so he made the call to unmask Tiger Mask and build him up for a match with Tsuruta on this show. While the plan always was for Misawa to end up at the top, the ascent was quicker than expected. Tsuruta was originally to win the match. Misawa was to come close, because All Japan did slow elevations to the top. But the crowd at Budokan Hall that night was so pro-Misawa, and nearly sold out the building at a time when it was rare for All Japan to do so. While sitting at the merchandise table and seeing all the excitement of the crowd and Misawa merchandise being sold, Baba called an audible. Misawa won, and in one night, he was a superstar. While Sting’s ascension never led to a business turnaround, and for the next several years, Sting’s matches with Flair didn’t draw at the level Lex Luger or Dusty Rhodes did, All Japan caught fire immediately. The company sold out its next 200 plus shows in Tokyo, a streak that lasted until March 2, 1996, with Misawa as the top star.

*Sting & Lex Luger & Randy Savage vs. the NWO, with Hulk Hogan as the mystery partner of Kevin Nash & Scott Hall on July 7, 1996 in Daytona Beach at the Bash at the Beach PPV. Business was already turning around for WCW, with a Flair vs. Randy Savage house show program. But the Hogan heel turn took business and TV ratings to a new level for the next several years. The irony is that in making the company so much bigger, it led to increased spending, which ended up dooming the company just four years later when popularity nosedived and expenses were so high.

*Bret Hart vs. Steve Austin I Quit match with Ken Shamrock as referee, on March 23, 1997, at WrestleMania XIII at the Rosemont Horizon in suburban Chicago. While not the main event, this was clearly the big match on a show that on its own was the worst-performing WrestleMania ever on PPV. The match was a double-turn, a ***** match ending with a bloodied Austin passing out from the pain and refusing to tap while locked for a long period of time in Hart’s sharpshooter. Austin was already a headlining heel, but this babyface turn set the wheels in motion for the hottest period for WWF business and popularity in history. This was probably the more modern version of the Rhodes turn, and it had even bigger business repercussions. The Hart vs. Austin feud started to turn business around that summer, and Austin came out of the program as the hottest babyface in company history. Business picked up from that match, got stronger as the year went on and exploded in 1998 with Austin as the company’s main singles star as sometime champion.

*Hiroshi Tanahashi vs. Kazuchika Okada IWGP title match on February 12, 2012. Okada was a 24-year-old wrestler who had potential but was never any kind of a star. He had been in TNA for two years, where he was just a job guy, but came back a month earlier at the Tokyo Dome and had an unimpressive win. But he was given a title shot at Tanahashi, and booker Gedo had decided months earlier that he was his project and he was going to make him a star. Okada won the championship here and became an instant main event star. The Tanahashi vs. Okada program wasn’t the only reason New Japan’s business tripled over a three year period, but it was the top program, and the two had one of the best series of matches in history trading the title back-and-forth over the next four years of strong company growth.

How Tanahashi vs. Omega will be viewed with the value of hindsight is unclear. But New Japan needed something big. The strong run had started to fade in recent months. And then, in one fell swoop, they lost four major stars.

They had to make a new foreign superstar. Omega got the call. It was a gutsy move because he was not a newcomer, had been with the promotion for the past year as a mid-carder battling for the junior heavyweight title. On the plus side, Omega was an excellent performer who knew the Japanese scene, having been a regular since 2008 with the DDT promotion. He had worked a number of big New Japan shows as part of a tag team with Kota Ibushi. He signed a full-time deal with New Japan in late 2014, and spent much of the past year as junior heavyweight champion, the Cleaner of the Bullet Club. When A.J. Styles left, the promotion decided to back Omega, having him turn on and beat down Styles in a 1/5 angle at Korakuen Hall, to take over the head position in the Bullet Club, right after pinning Shinsuke Nakamura in a tag team match.

In most of the aforementioned scenarios of one match making an instant headliner, the pressure wasn't on like here. Mid Atlantic was loaded with talent and Steamboat was just a guy who was good looking that they decided to shoot an angle with. Sting wasn't being groomed to be a top babyface, and was just a guy with potential who was given a shot in a big match on television where the idea is you don't give away your money matches on the road on television, and Flair vs. Sting was not a planned main event direction at the time. With Misawa, they did need someone to fill the Tenryu slot as Tsuruta's big rival, but felt it had to be slow because nobody would buy it, but he got over so big when he unmasked that Baba went with it from the start.

Omega's big win, capturing the IC title that was vacated when Nakamura signed with WWE and New Japan, for whatever reason, decided that instead of rushing an Omega win over Nakamura before Nakamura's contract expired, would just vacate the title and Omega would get credibility for beating Tanahashi, who is still viewed as the company's biggest star.

But that decision was tricky, because Tanahashi had just lost the Tokyo Dome main event to Okada, and with Nakamura and Styles gone, his value to the company was even greater. Tanahashi had a legitimate dislocated shoulder, suffered three weeks earlier. On the Osaka show, Omega and the Young Bucks destroyed his shoulder to weaken him. During the match, Omega worked on the shoulder much of the way, in a match that featured incredible selling by both men, with Omega doing just as good a job of selling a knee injury, even to the point of doing a moonsault off one leg and other moves like he was working with one steady leg later in the match.

Both came through in a match that at least as a live spectacle, appeared to hit all its marks. Omega came across like a major superstar. Tanahashi, between his selling, the length of the match, and the match story, wasn't hurt at all. The title, even with Nakamura not losing it, looked to have kept its credibility. And Omega vs. Tanahashi now looks like a major program going forward.

Similar to that of Steamboat or the draw with Sting or even the loss by Austin (that was booked as stronger than a win due to the way it was done), was an important cog in this story. But times are different and just a win over a top guy alone may help him in acceptance, but he not only needed a win but to be able to fill the shoes of Styles.

His performance, along with Tanahashi's during the match, helped. He came across like a legit singles main eventer during the match, and even more so as he controlled the audience with his

post-match promo while Tanahashi had to be helped out of the ring.

Omega told a story from before the match, that he had to win clean, actually aiming it at a section of fans, smart marks was the term he and The Young Bucks were using, because they'd think less of the match if it had interference. Then, early in the match, when Cody Hall and Tama Tonga tried to help out, he explained he wanted to win on his own, and sent them to the back. Of course, as a heel, that was just the set-up for more interference, not just from Hall and Tonga coming back out, but from The Young Bucks, who were hiding under the ring. However, Michael Elgin made the save for Tanahashi, and in the end, they went several minutes with no interference, with Omega winning with his One Winged Angel in 29:10.

Omega then did a post-match interview, where he announced that he and The Young Bucks are now "The Elite," which means a new tag line for T-shirts. The Bucks had come out earlier in the show wearing new "The Elite" T-shirts. Then he said he was the complete performer, that he could wrestle, that he could talk and that he could sing. He then sang Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream."

Just three days earlier New Japan was looking, well bleak wouldn't be the word, but looked like a once super-hot promotion past its peak in the midst of a slow decline.

The New Beginnings in Osaka on 2/11, before the company's usual hottest crowd, was a good show. But it was far from the caliber of most big shows in recent years. There were throw away matches that were just there. The junior heavyweight tag team three-way, where Matt Sydal & Ricochet won the titles, was very good. Katsuyori Shibata's Never Open weight title defense against Tomohiro Ishii was tremendous, with Shibata looking like the guy who will be put in the Nakamura position as the other top Japanese singles star. The angle with Omega and the Bucks taking out Tanahashi's shoulder to build for three days later was well done. But the show ending was a disappointment, as the fans just weren't that into Okada's IWGP title defense against Hirooki Goto, who needed badly to step up and didn't.

While a very good match, particularly the last several minutes, it was a disappointment because of the high standard that Tanahashi, Styles and Okada had set in recent year for IWGP title matches. As a big show, it definitely felt empty without Nakamura and Styles.

Osaka drew 5,180 fans, which was more than the G-1 show in the building did last year, but it failed to sell out, and did roughly the same as Power Struggle in November, but with more papering. That show featured an IWGP jr. tag title change as Ricochet & Matt Sydal won the titles in a three-way over champions, The Young Bucks, and former champions Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly. It also featured a Never Open weight six-man title change as Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi won the titles from Mark & Jay Briscoe & Toru Yano, but the Briscoes & Yano regained them three nights later.

But the company between late 2010 and early 2015 had 14 straight sellouts in the building.

Niigata three nights later drew a legitimate sellout of 3,603 fans for Tanahashi vs. Omega, a good sign because the advance was slow. Niigata felt like the New Japan of the past several years, only with a new player on top. Omega, while very different from Styles, seemed to fill his spot well. Tanahashi, even with a bad right shoulder, is the best big show closer of the current era, and when they were done it felt fresh and new.

A new member of the Bullet Club was also teased in Niigata, as after Tomoaki Honma & Togi Makabe retained the IWGP heavyweight tag team titles over Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson, Tonga came out and said there would be a new member of the team and he and that person wanted a match with Honma & Makabe. Honma accepted the challenge. The only thing made clear is this would be a new person who is headed to the promotion and not someone in the promotion. The only name we've heard going around for the spot was Tevita Fifta, better known as Camacho in WWE and Myka in TNA, who is Tonga's (Alepate Fifta) younger brother.

New Japan World has two shows this coming weekend, both starting at 4:30 a.m. Eastern time. "Honor Rising," takes place on 2/19 and 2/20, from Korakuen Hall. Both shows are sold out. The concept is similar to Fantastica Mania, only these are joint shows with ROH.

The 2/19 show has Jushin Liger & Sydal vs. Dalton Castle & Ryusuke Taguchi, Gedo vs. Delirious in the battle of the bookers, Kushida vs. Frankie Kazarian, Tanahashi & Michael Elgin & Honma & Moose vs. Fale & Tonga & Takahashi & Cody Hall, Fish & O'Reilly & Katsuyori Shibata vs. Omega & Young Bucks, Mark & Jay Briscoe vs. Anderson & Gallows, Jay Lethal & Tetsuya Naito vs. Okada & Yoshi-Hashi and a main event of Roderick Strong vs. Tomohiro Ishii for the TV title.

The 2/20 lineup has David Finlay vs. Jay White in a rematch of their great match on 2/11, Liger & Sydal vs. Delirious & Gedo, Castle vs. Kazarian, Fish & O'Reilly & Shibata & Goto vs. Anderson & Gallows & Fale & Tonga, Kushida & Moose vs. Naito & Bushi, Tanahashi & Elgin & Strong vs. Okada & Ishii & Yoshi-Hashi, Briscoes & Yano defend the Never Open Weight titles against Young Bucks & Omega, and Lethal vs. Honma for the ROH title.

Adam Cole was originally booked on the tour, but due to an issue with his family, had to pull out of the tour and was replaced by Kazarian.

After those shows, and a 2/25 Lionsgate show in Tokyo built around younger wrestlers with a New Japan vs. Pro Wrestling NOAH theme (although the main event has Yuji Nagata vs. Mitsuhiro Kitamiya), the next thing on the schedule is the New Japan Cup.

The Cup is a single elimination tournament where the winner will face Okada for the IWGP title at Invasion Attack on 4/10 at Sumo Hall in Tokyo.

The participants haven't been yet announced for the tournament even though it starts on 3/3 at the Ota Ward Gym in Tokyo for the 44th anniversary of the promotion (first show ever was March 4, 1972, at Ota Ward Gym headlined by Antonio Inoki vs. Karl Gotch). The finals are 3/12 in Aomori.

New Japan World hasn't announced any shows for March but one would think 3/3 at the Ota Ward Gym, 3/4 at Korakuen Hall and the 3/12 finals would all be broadcast, as well as shows on 3/19 in Nagoya (a somewhat major show) and 3/27 at Korakuen Hall.

2/11 NEW BEGINNINGS IN OSAKA AT EDION ARENA - 5,180 (almost sold out)

1. Jay White beat David Finlay in 7:01. Great mat wrestling. Really a perfect match for these two. White when put in a situation like this is really very close to Chad Gable as a great working newcomer. Finlay went for a cannonball in the corner but White caught him and took him down into

a half crab. He then pulled Finlay into the middle of the ring and put him in a full Boston crab, and turned that into a lion tamer version and Finlay tapped. The only negative is with five more minutes, this would have been excellent. ***1/4

2. Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Ryusuke Taguchi beat Kazushi Sakuraba & Yoshi-Hashi & Gedo in 7:25. Not much to this. Tiger Mask has a messed up shoulder. Taguchi does nothing but ass base attacks, and after some hip attacks, he put Gedo in the ankle lock for the submission. *3/4

3. Satoshi Kojima & Hiroyoshi Tenzan beat Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi in 11:05. It was pretty bad when Nakanishi was in, but the crowd was into this. The finish saw Kojima & Tenzan use the 3-D on Nakanishi, and Kojima hit Nakanishi with a lariat, but he kicked out quickly. But Kojima's second lariat put him away. They all shook hands after. Kojima then said that the four of them can deliver and the crowd reacted strong for that. They shook hands again and all four climbed the turnbuckles to pose. *3/4

4. Tetsuya Naito & Evil & Bushi beat Kushida & Michael Elgin & Juice Robinson in 8:48. Naito and announcer Shimpei Nogami were arguing before the match. Nogami kept yelling "Justice" at Naito, which is for Nagata (nicknamed Blue Justice). Naito tore up Nogami's dress shirt and he had a Nagata shirt underneath, and Naito tore that up. Elgin made a nice hot tag with German suplexes on Naito and Evil and pressed Bushi overhead, held him up with one arm and dropped him. The announcers compared Elgin to the Road Warriors, who were huge in Japan in the 80s and 90s. Robinson was on the top rope but Naito scooped his leg and he was crotched. Bushi blew green mist in Kushida's eyes and hit a tope on him. Evil hit a running lariat on Robinson and then pinned him with a judo foot sweep. **3/4

5. Bad Luck Fale & Tama Tonga & Yujiro Takahashi won the Never Open weight trios titles from Mark & Jay Briscoe & Toru Yano in 10:08. Mostly the Yano comedy show. Mark took one look at the size of Fale and wanted to tag Yano, who seemed to not want to tag in. The Briscoes set up the Doomsday Device, but Takahashi shoved Mark off the top rope. Fale then hit Jay with the grenade. Yano gave Fale and Takahashi low blows, but Tonga then gave Yano a low blow and pinned him after a double arm DDT. *

6. Ricochet & Matt Sydal won the IWGP jr. tag titles over champions the Young Bucks as well as Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly in 14:59. The Bucks came out and gave a shout out to Daniel Bryan, and then Nick said how "We're now the best tag team of all-time and all you smart marks know it." Ricochet was the big crowd favorite and the star of the match. The match was excellent with all the fast paced moves and good timing. O'Reilly backdropped Ricochet over the top and he flipped in mid air as he took out the Bucks and Cody Hall. Fish did a flip dive on everyone. O'Reilly used an armbar in the ropes on Sydal. Matt used a sliding kick through the ropes on O'Reilly. Ricochet & Sydal did springboard splashes onto the Bucks for a near fall. Sydal missed a Frankensteiner off the top and ended up crotched. The Bucks did a double superkick to Ricochet. Matt power bombed Ricochet into Sydal. They put one on top of the other and Nick came off the top with a swanton on both. Hall grabbed O'Reilly and carried him backstage. The finish saw Ricochet hit the Benadryller on Nick and then Ricochet used the shooting star on Nick while Sydal did the move at the same time to Matt for the pin. ****

7. Katsuyori Shibata retained the Never Open weight title pinning Tomohiro Ishii in 18:47.

This is like every Shibata vs. Ishii match. Crowd went crazy for this from start-to-finish and it was slightly better than their Tokyo Dome match. The opened by each man allowing the other to give them a brainbuster, which the guy taking it would then defiantly get up. But after the third one on Shibata, he couldn't get up. Shibata did moves like the triangle, guillotine, Death Valley bomb, German suplex and Busaiku knee. Ishii was bleeding from the mouth. Shibata used a flying armbars for a near submission. The ref teased stopping it. Ishii made the ropes. Shibata set up the penalty kick, but Ishii grabbed his leg and head-butted Shibata. The finish saw both guys slapping the hell out of each other and Shibata got the choke. He wore Ishii out with it, let it go and hit the penalty kick for the pin. Ishii was practically carried to the back doing a super sell job after. ****1/2

8. Kenny Omega & Doc Gallows & Karl Anderson beat Hiroshi Tanahashi & Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma in 17:11. Omega mostly worked on Tanahashi's right shoulder. Omega whipped Tanahashi shoulder first into the barricade and hit him with a broom over the back. They continued to work on Tanahashi's right arm and shoulder. Anderson did a kneedrop to the arm. Omega and Honma's trading elbows was great. Honma missed a diving head-butt. Gallows jumped on Omega's back and Anderson was behind him and they did a triple splash on Honma but Makabe saved. Honma was fighting back against all three, and twice blocked Anderson's gunstun. Anderson & Gallows used the Magic Killer on Makabe. Omega took Tanahashi out with a reverse Frankensteiner. Omega then pinned Honma with the One Winged Angel. After the match, the Bullet Club destroyed Tanahashi. Omega hit the shoulder with chair shots. Matt Jackson came off the top rope with a chair shot to Tanahashi's injured shoulder. The Bucks held Tanahashi's arm over a garbage can and Omega came off the top with a high fly flow onto the shoulder on the garbage can. ***1/2

9. Kazuchika Okada retained the IWGP heavyweight title over Hirooki Goto in 25:27. Goto painted his face and body up to look like Hakushi in the 90s. It started slow. The crowd was way behind Okada and Goto just felt like he was missing something. Plus, the crowd never bought Goto winning, I guess because they realized what a bad decision that would have been. Goto finally hit the shouten kai (suplex into a spinebuster), but Okada was able to get his hand on the rope. Okada then hit the rainmaker, but collapsed. They traded elbows while on their knees. Okada hit a clothesline, a German suplex and his dropkick. He went for the rainmaker, but Goto head-butted him. Okada tried a second rainmaker, but Goto head-butted him again. Goto went for the shouten kai, but Okada landed on his feet and hit the rainmaker. He then hit a second one, and followed with a third one. Goto sold it big and was pinned. Goto & Okada talked after the match with Okada saying that a lot of things had happened so far this year in New Japan, but I'm here as champion so there is no problem. He then invited Goto to fill the Nakamura spot in CHAOS. He then said that last month "the guy who left New Japan," (in reference to Nakamura) said that the greatest sport in the world was pro wrestling, but he thinks that's not exactly right, that the greatest in the world is New Japan Pro Wrestling, and the greatest wrestler is Kazuchika Okada. The crowd reacted big to his saying New Japan was the best promotion in the world. ***1/2

2/14 NEW BEGINNINGS IN NIIGATA AT AORE NAGAOKA (3,603 sellout)

1. Young Bucks & Cody Hall beat Jushin Liger & Tiger Mask & Captain New Japan in 5:55.

The crowd was hot for this. Match was way rushed. Some comedy spots, and then they quickly went to near falls. The finish saw Hall have Captain in a tombstone piledriver position and Matt & Nick Jackson both came off the top rope with springboard spikes, a double Indy-taker, and Matt pinned Captain. **1/4

2. Bobby Fish & Kyle O'Reilly beat Kazushi Sakuraba & Gedo in 8:25. Aside from a tremendous series of moves and counters on the mat between O'Reilly and Sakuraba, there wasn't much to this. Fish & O'Reilly are old-school MMA fans so it was really clear how working with Sakuraba was a big deal. Sakuraba used a triangle and heel hook on O'Reilly. They went to near falls before Fish & O'Reilly used Chasing the Dragon on Gedo and Fish scored the pin. **1/4

3. Hiroyoshi Tenzan & Satoshi Kojima & Ricochet & Matt Sydal beat Yuji Nagata & Manabu Nakanishi & Ryusuke Taguchi & David Finlay in 8:14. Very good match, other than when Tenzan and Nakanishi were doing their version of high spots while under water. Ricochet & Sydal were the stars, doing a double moonsault on Taguchi for a near fall. Good stuff with Kojima vs. Nagata, as always. The finish saw Ricochet hit the Benadryller on Finlay and followed with a pin after a shooting star press. ***1/4

4. Tetsuya Naito & Evil beat Michael Elgin & Jay White in 8:38. Another good match. Before the match started, Naito did a fist bump to announcer Milano Collection A.T. He went to do the same with Shimpei Nogami, but Nogami refused. Elgin backdropped White over the top on both guys. Elgin did a strong hot tag spot. Evil pinned White with a judo foot sweep. After the match, Naito gave the ref a sliding dropkick. Naito went back to Milano for a fist bump, but Milano refused because Naito had attacked the ref. Nogami kept yelling "Justice" at him again. ***

5. Mark & Jay Briscoe & Toru Yano regained the Never six man tag titles from Bad Luck Fale & Yujiro Takahashi & Tama Tonga in 8:20. A lot better than their Osaka match. Mark did a blockbuster off the apron on Takahashi. Tonga crawled around the ring like a dog chasing Yano. The ref stopped Takahashi as he went to low blow Yano at one point. The finish saw the ref distracted as the Briscoes pulled Tonga and Fale out of the ring, and Yano gave Takahashi a low blow and pinned him with an outside cradle. **1/4

6. Kazuchika Okada & Tomohiro Ishii & Yoshi-Hashi beat Hirooki Goto & Katsuyori Shibata & Juice Robinson in 16:36. The crowd was most into Ishii vs. Shibata but this was really good. Robinson got a lot of offense in on Okada, including a spin kick, a cannonball, a crossbody off the top and a diving head-butt for near falls. Okada came back with a neckbreaker over the knee on Robinson, followed by the Randy Savage elbow. Okada hit the dropkick and followed with the rainmaker. ***3/4

7. Kushida retained the IWGP jr. title beating Bushi in 16:32. Great match. Naito and Evil came out about 3:00 in. Evil interfered, putting a chair around Kushida's neck and then swinging another chair like a baseball bat and hitting the chair around the neck. The crowd didn't like that. They teased a count out. Kushida came back with a running flip dive. Evil and Naito kept interfering. Kushida did a springboard move right into green mist Bushi blew in his face. Bushi then used a tope. This got silly because even though the ref was distracted from the green mist, Kushida had it all over his face for the rest of the match and the ref just stood there like an idiot. Bushi used a

double foot stomp for a near fall. Kushida finally lost his cool and punched Bushi right in the face and started holding his hand. Kushida went after Bushi's mask. With the ref distracted, Bushi blew mist a second time, and then used a backslide and bridge for a great near fall. Pretty much everyone figured that was a title change. Bushi then used his MX, which is jumping off the top rope and hitting a codebreaker, but Kushida kicked out again. Bushi started yelling at the ref for counting too slow. Bushi came off the top rope but this time Kushida met him at the bottom with a codebreaker. Evil tripped up Kushida. Ryusuke Taguchi ran out and hit a hip attack on Evil. Kushida went for the hoverboard lock (Kimura), and while flying around, dropkicked Naito off the apron. He got the hoverboard lock on and Naito went to interfere but Jay White tackled Naito from outside the ring to stop him. ****1/4

8. Togi Makabe & Tomoaki Honma retained the IWGP heavyweight tag team titles beating Karl Anderson & Doc Gallows in 14:16. Another excellent match. Most of the match was Honma having his arm worked over. Gallows held the arm on the floor and Anderson used a kneedrop off the ramp on it. Honma had to run in to beat the 20 count (in Japan, like Mexico, titles change hands via DQ or count out). Gallows hit Honma in the shoulder with a chair outside the ring to tease another count out. Honma came back with a power vertical suplex on Gallows and the crowd went nuts for that. He then tagged Makabe. They beat down Makabe. Honma didn't use his first kokeshi (falling head-butt) until 9:00 in. Makabe took a running kick and reverse gunstun by Anderson for a near fall. Anderson also hit the gunstun on Honma and he kicked out. Gallows used a power bomb and Anderson followed with a Bloody Sunday DDT on Honma for a near fall. They set up the Magic Killer on Honma, but Makabe broke it up. Makabe knocked both down with clotheslines. He then started slapping Honma in the face to revive him. This spot worked great. Makabe put Anderson on his shoulders and Honma climbed to the top with a spear head-butt. Makabe clotheslined Gallows over the top rope and then hit the King Kong kneedrop on Anderson, and Honma followed with a diving head-butt and pin on Anderson. Tonga then came out to issue the challenge for the titles for himself and his mystery new Bullet Club member. ****

9. Kenny Omega pinned Hiroshi Tanahashi in 29:10 to win the vacant IC title. In many ways, this was a masterpiece of a match, from Omega emphasizing beforehand he wanted no outside interference to detract from the match and the win, to lead to all the interference. Yujiro Takahashi and Cody Hall were at ringside. Omega told them not to interfere and ordered them to the back. Omega quickly hit the shoulder breaker on Tanahashi's bad right shoulder that he'd worked over in the post-match in Osaka. He continued to work over the shoulder and then suplexed Tanahashi into the front row chairs, knocking the chairs flying. Omega then put on a Los Ingobernables mask that a fan, running away from the action, left behind. Omega did a moonsault off the guard rail. He then picked up a chair and drove it into Tanahashi's shoulder. Tanahashi barely beat the 20 count to get in. Omega went back to working on the shoulder. He went for another shoulder breaker but Tanahashi used the dragon screw and Omega started selling the right knee. Omega came back with a famouser and Fujiwara armbar, but Tanahashi made the ropes. Omega used a forward fireman's carry and moonsault off the middle rope for a near fall. He was doing this while selling the leg as he kicked off the rope with only one leg doing the moonsault. He tried a gut wrench but his knee went out. Tanahashi then backdropped Omega over the top rope and used the high fly flow to the floor. He followed with a dragon screw over the ropes. Omega tried an enzuigiri but Tanahashi used two more dragon screws and the Texas cloverleaf. Omega got near the ropes but Tanahashi pulled him

to the center and was putting the pressure on. Hall came back out and distracted the ref. The Young Bucks then came from under the ring and hit Tanahashi with a double superkick. They then hit Tanahashi with the Indy-taker. Omega then hit the Styles clash but Tanahashi kicked out. Part of the story of this match is Omega used both Nakamura and Styles' finishers on Tanahashi and he kept kicking out, but when he used his own finisher, Tanahashi didn't kick out. The Bucks then used the numbing spray they use in Japan to basically numb minor injuries, spraying it on Omega's right knee. Tanahashi used a dragon suplex but Omega came back with a ton of forearms and was back working on the shoulder. Tanahashi hit elbow after elbow until Omega used a reverse huracanrana. That's the hot move right now but it's scary because way too often the guy taking it doesn't get all the way over and lands on his head. Omega picked Tanahashi up for the One Winged Angel on his shoulders, but Tanahashi from that position hit a reverse huracanrana on Omega. Tanahashi followed with a straitjacket German suplex for a near fall. Tanahashi went to the top rope for the high fly flow, but Nick threw him off the ropes. Omega tried to hit Tanahashi with a garbage can, but he ducked and the garbage can hit ref Red Shoes. With Red Shoes down, the Bucks were putting the boots to Tanahashi. They put his shoulder on top of a garbage can and Omega went to the top rope to jump on it. Michael Elgin then ran in and cleaned house on both Bucks, including doing a double fall away slam on both of them. Tanahashi then slammed Omega off the top rope like he was Ric Flair, but Omega landed on the garbage can. Elgin then picked up both Bucks and carried them to the back. Tanahashi used a neckbreaker and sling blade for a near fall. Tanahashi used a crossbody off the top, and then missed the high fly flow. Omega used a bom a ye to the back of Tanahashi's head, a jumping knee to the chin but Tanahashi kicked out. He hit another bom a ye, before hitting the One Winged Angel and getting the pin. ****3/4

After the match, Omega did an English language promo telling fans that "Some of you may be surprised. Some of you may be sad. It's Valentine's Day and some of you wish Tanahashi could be your Valentine. You have a new Valentine. You have a new God. I can wrestle. I can talk. And I can sing. All you ladies, me and the Young Bucks are The Elite." He then started singing "Teenage Dream" by Katy Perry. Omega then mocked Tanahashi, who was selling the beating huge and needed to be helped out of the ring, by playing the air guitar. Like Tanahashi, he jumped in the air, but then collapsed upon landing, selling the right knee.

WWE made official the story we'd been reporting on regarding a light heavyweight television tournament as a WWE Network exclusive.

The show, called the Global Cruiserweight Series, will be a ten-week long tournament airing on Wednesdays at 9 p.m., immediately after NXT, starting on 7/13, with the championship final on 9/14.

The show will be a 32-man single elimination tournament with all wrestlers under 205 pounds. As noted here, at one point the idea was for all 32 wrestlers to be unsigned wrestlers. Later, the idea was to have both wrestlers under contract but who had not appeared on NXT yet, as well as unsigned wrestlers invited, with the tournament being something of a tryout to see how well they do and how audiences react to them.

At least at one point, the tournament was designed as a vehicle to introduce Manny Andrade, the

former La Sombra.

Paul Levesque said the company has always had the philosophy that you either work for WWE or you don't, but this tournament is an example of softening that. "We are going to allow (non-WWE talent) these guys to come in. I'm not just trying to find the cruiserweights that are the obvious ones. I think those guys will be there, the top guys in the world. But I'm trying to find the undiscovered diamonds someplace else that will blow people's minds, someone who maybe hasn't gotten the opportunity yet to be seen."

He said that William Regal is looking at talent all over the world, to find both wrestlers people know and those who people aren't aware of yet. "We want to put them in this and let's see what they can do." He in specific said that while they can't use talent with New Japan (and this would apply to TNA as well as those contracted to ROH or Lucha Underground, whether ROH will allow non-contracted guys to appear or WWE would use guys who work for ROH is a question that time will tell on), they are looking at people from Progress, Evolve and Revolution Pro.

He categorized the tournament as both a recruiting tool for WWE, but also a platform for the talent to increase their name value if they aren't signed and stay on the independent scene.

The matches will all be taped in conjunction with the NXT tapings at Full Sail University.

While the primary objective is to try out the idea of a cruiserweight show, doing a "Tough Enough" type thing with undiscovered talent that are actually already good wrestlers as opposed to untrained people with good looks, a secondary objective is to send word to talent that may have thought size would hinder them in WWE to not sign with New Japan, ROH, TNA or Lucha Underground. A few months ago, when we were first told about this concept, we were outright told to get the word out for wrestlers who if are under 205 pounds and feel they are talented, not to sign anywhere.

Levesque did an interview with PW Insider saying the majority of the wrestlers in the tournament would be people who are not under contract to WWE. He said he wants the best guys in the world, and to not eliminate potential top guys because they are already under contract (the original idea was all non-WWE talent). He said they are looking at the U.K., Japan and China for the best talent. The show is looking at being probably three or four matches per week, and with personality profiles to introduce the talent. They will be announcing and promoting the talent prior to the first episode airing.

While at this point there is only a plan for this as an experimental series, Levesque is hoping it becomes a recurring network show.

Quinton "Rampage" Jackson signed a two-fight deal with Bellator as part of an out-of-court settlement on a breach of contract lawsuit filed by the organization.

Jackson, 37, was Bellator's biggest star when he signed in 2013, after his UFC contract expired after a loss to Glover Teixeira, his third in a row.

Jackson was strongly negative about UFC on the way out, and spent months singing the praises of how much things were better at Bellator. But a year later, he was taking the opposite approach, saying that he never realized how much better things were in UFC.

Jackson earned far more money during his UFC run, being among the highest paid fighters in company history based on drawing huge PPV numbers in fights with Jon Jones, Rashad Evans, Wanderlei Silva, Forrest Griffin and Chuck Liddell.

He had come from Pride, where he was a major star, known for his pro wrestling-inspired ring entrances and promos, and for big matches with Silva, Liddell, Kevin Randleman and Kazushi Sakuraba.

He captured the UFC light heavyweight title from Liddell on May 26, 2007, in Las Vegas via knockout in just 1:53. He then competed in a title vs. title match with Pride champion Dan Henderson on September 8, 2007, in London. That fight, on Spike TV, is still the third most-watched fight ever on U.S. cable television, drawing 5,811,000 viewers, trailing only the 2006 Ken Shamrock vs. Tito Ortiz fight on Spike (6,524,000 viewers) and the 2009 Kimbo Slice vs. Roy Nelson Ultimate Fighter fight on Spike (6,100,000 viewers).

Jackson lost the title in his second defense via close decision to Forrest Griffin in a significant upset on July 5, 2008, a fight that was voted Match of the Year.

Jackson was signed to a joint contract through Spike TV, with both Bellator and TNA wrestling, with the idea of being a major star on both platforms, which would cross-promote him.

He debuted with TNA in June of that year with a television angle with Kurt Angle that was tremendous. But it went nowhere. Instead of building to a match or confrontation, the two shook hands and joined forces a few weeks later.

Jackson ended up as part of the Main Event Mafia in TNA, a babyface group that included Angle, Sting, Magnus and Samoa Joe. However, once starting pro wrestling training, Jackson, a lifelong fan who took a lot of his MMA mannerisms from the Junkyard Dog, found out that pro wrestling hurts.

Jackson had always wanted to be a pro wrestler, but never found his way into the business, and instead fell into fighting, where he became a big star in a loss to Sakuraba on the July 29, 2001, Pride show at the Saitama Super Arena.

The unknown Jackson, billed as a homeless person by Pride, playing on American stereotypes, slammed the smaller Sakuraba all over the place in a short fight, until he ran out of gas and Sakuraba beat him via choke in 5:41. Originally Jackson was brought in to be a gimmick opponent for Sakuraba, as a one-and-done. But Jackson got over so well that Battlarts brought him in for a pro wrestling show to face Alexander Otsuka, in what was likely a real match. Pride, seeing an obvious angle, then booked Jackson against Yuki Ishikawa, the top star of Battlarts, for a shoot match on November 3, 2001, in Tokyo, which he won in 1:52 and he remained a regular with the promotion until leaving in 2006 to sign with the WFA.

The WFA attempted a PPV with Jackson vs. Matt Lindland as the main event on June 22, 2006, and then went out of business. UFC purchased the assets, the footage of the show and its contracts, largely to get Jackson and Lyoto Machida. Since Jackson had stopped UFC's top star, Liddell, on November 9, 2003, in a Pride fight, in the second round, UFC wanted to build a Liddell vs. Jackson title match so Liddell could win a rematch.

However, Jackson won that fight and became UFC's champion in what was at the time its marquee weight class.

Jackson quickly decided against doing any pro wrestling training until after his fighting career was over, because of the physical punishment. After TNA show a ridiculous angle where Tito Ortiz, who Jackson was facing on a Bellator PPV, hit him with a hammer, the decision was made by Bellator to have both taken off Impact and Jackson decided against returning.

He fought three times in Bellator. A fight with Ortiz, scheduled as Bellator's first PPV main event, fell through when Ortiz suffered a neck injury. Instead, Jackson won television fights over Joey Beltran and Christian M'Pumbu, before headlining Bellator's only PPV show, a very disputed decision win over King Mo Lawal on May 17, 2014, in Memphis. The show did slightly more than 100,000 buys on PPV, and Jackson's PPV bonus didn't kick in until the 200,000 buy mark. Still, Bellator gave Jackson a bonus above his contract numbers.

Jackson then claimed breach of contract. He claimed Bellator had not given him full disclosure of the PPV breakdown, and claimed Bellator and Viacom had not delivered on promises to get him outside fighting entertainment gigs. Spike had produced a Jackson reality show and got him meetings with Paramount producers as far as movie roles, but none materialized.

He claimed he was a free agent and signed with UFC, with the announcement made during a December 20, 2014, live show on FS 1. Bellator President Scott Coker immediately responded saying that Jackson was still under contract, and the company filed suit.

UFC announced Jackson vs. Fabio Maldonado for a fight on 4/25 in Montreal. Bellator got an injunction 18 days before the fight in New Jersey Superior Court preventing the fight from taking place. However, four days before the show, an Appellate court overturned the original ruling, but just for the one fight, stating that Bellator didn't show enough evidence that it would suffer irreparable harm if Jackson fought. Jackson won a lackluster fight via decision, but with the original injunction put back into effect, his career was frozen until either the lawsuit came to court or both sides settled.

Jackson had talked of retiring, because he did not want to return to Bellator and thought the legal process could drag out a long period of time. But the two sides settled out-of-court on the new deal.

Jackson would be fighting in a light heavyweight division that includes champion Liam McGeary, as well as potential marquee fights with Lawal, Phil Davis and Ortiz, as well as if he'd go to heavyweight, possible fights with Slice or Bobby Lashley.

Coming out of the 2/6 UFC show in Las Vegas was a big question.

Is Stephen "Wonderboy" Thompson that good? Or did Johnny Hendricks fall off a cliff?

Hendricks, the guy who gave Georges St-Pierre a beating, dueled current champion Robbie Lawler evenly for ten rounds, and while he'd lost a few decisions, had never been stopped and never even been in danger of being stopped in a career where he's done nothing but battle the best in the division for four-and-a-half years.

He showed up against Thompson much smaller than usual, and made himself a human heavy bag

while the ex-karate fighter put on a stand-up show and finished him in 3:31.

It opens up all kinds of questions. There's the giant elephant in the room at every MMA show these days, animals with big tusks and floppy ears called USADA for short. All kinds of guys are showing up smaller, slower and softer. But there's always the chance of an injury. In this case, Hendricks was not softer. Hendricks offered no injury excuse, or any kind of excuse other than saying Thompson didn't fight him the way he expected. I'm not sure what that means considering Thompson fought the same as he always fights.

Hendricks did miss weight for his last fight, and with the banning of IVs to rehydrate, a lot of fighters are getting their natural weight down, meaning they will be smaller, so they aren't cutting as much. It isn't that Hendricks didn't look like he trained. He looked completely fit, just small. That affected his strength, as when he couldn't throw Thompson around at will, like he could with a lot of his opponents, he seemed to check out. But checking out was even more weird, as Hendricks was a guy who has competed at a top level, at a two-time NCAA champion wrestler and former UFC welterweight champion, against tough guys, for a dozen years. He lost very few, and every loss has been close, and he's won more close ones than he's lost.

He also changed a lot of coaches, and camps. Perhaps there's personal stress. His business, the Big Rigg Steak House, had just recently closed.

The main event was a surprise ending to a show that did big numbers even though it was lackluster.

The show, originally a PPV card headlined by Fabricio Werdum vs. Cain Velasquez, changed when both pulled out, drew 1,317,000 viewers, the fifth highest Fight Night ever on FS 1. The peak was 1,467,000 viewers for the Ovince Saint Preux vs. Rafael Feijao Cavalcante fight.

The prelims, headlined by K.J. Noons vs. Joshua Burkman, did 1,093,000 viewers, the second highest Fight Night prelim in history (trailing the recent 1/17 show which did 1,767,000). The post-fight show did 535,000 viewers, the best number for a Fight Night post-fight show that wasn't part of Fox Sports Live.

The show also did 170,000 viewers in Canada on TSN.

The UFC announced the attendance at the MGM Grand Garden Arena as 7,422 paying \$1,435,000. The figure is misleading because I'm guessing virtually all tickets were purchased for Werdum vs. Velasquez, and the number is those ticket buyers minus the small number that would have asked for refunds.

The Fight Pass prelims were built around C.M. Punk and Mickey Gall. Gall, as expected, quickly beat Mike Jackson, a reporter who was in his first pro fight. This led to a scene a few hours later that I've never seen before, as at the press conference, with Gall on the stage, Jackson showed up as media, asked him questions and then thanked him for not punching him as many times as he could have.

Punk vs. Gall was originally scheduled for June, but on 2/10, Punk had surgery for a herniated disc in his lower back, an injury that had been bothering him for some time. The surgery was similar to the one Cain Velasquez had the week before. The recovery time is four to six weeks, so this second surgery once again delays his debut although it is still planned against Gall this summer.

What was interesting is that Punk, known for his talking in pro wrestling, while speaking clearly, did nothing to sell the fight. He was dressed in a suit and tie and very respectful, but his take was that he and Gall would no both train for the fight and whoever trained the hardest between now and fight time would probably win.

1. Alex White (11-2) beat Artem Lobov (12-12-1, 1 no contest) via straight 30-27 scores in a featherweight fight. Lobov is a Russian who lives in Dublin, trains with Conor McGregor, and lost in the finals during the most recent season of The Ultimate Fighter. Not much happened in the first round. White got the better of striking and also scored a takedown. In the second round, White concentrated on kicking the body. White landed more and Lobov was bleeding under the left eye. White took him down again late in the round. White opened the third round with another takedown. By the end of the round, Lobov was bleeding from a number of cuts and White took him down again. White got \$24,000 for the win and Lobov got \$13,000 for the loss.

2. Mickey Gall (2-0) beat Mike Jackson (0-1) in :45 of a welterweight fight. They noted that Jackson was only the sixth fighter since Zuffa bought the company in 2001 to have their first fight in UFC. He was clearly over his head as far as being a UFC fighter, and actually is a reporter who had no long-term aspirations to be a pro fighter. Gall dropped him with a right to the jaw and after a few punches on the ground, Gall got his back and worked for a choke until he finished it. Gall got \$20,000 for the win and Jackson got \$10,000 for the loss.

3. Diego Rivas (7-0) beat Noad Lahat (9-2) at :23 of the second round in a featherweight fight. Lahat dominated the first round and worked for a few submissions but didn't get them. In the second round Rivas landed a devastating jumping knee that will be a candidate for knockout of the year. It was scary because Lahat was out cold, and it took some time to revive him and he was down for a long period of time. Rivas got \$70,000 for the win, including a \$50,000 performance bonus. Lahat got \$17,000 for the loss.

4. Justin Scoggins (11-2) beat Ray Borg (9-2) on scores of 30-27, 30-27 and 30-26 in a flyweight fight. Scoggins pretty well dominated the fight between two good fighters in the division, as he was taller and had more reach and was able to stop most of Borg's takedowns. Borg got a momentary first round takedown but was mostly out struck. Borg had a bloody nose in the first round. In the second round, Borg pulled guard. Scoggins got him down, Borg reversed and Scoggins reversed back. Scoggins landed a lot of punches and a spin kick. In the third round, Borg got a takedown, but Scoggins got up and slammed him down. Scoggins took him down again and held Borg down and seemed like he was trying to burn out the clock since he was easily ahead. Scoggins got \$34,000 for the win and Borg and \$18,000 for the loss.

5. Derrick Lewis (14-4, 1 no contest) beat Damian Grabowski (20-3) at 2:17 of a heavyweight fight. Grabowski came in with a big rep from the M-1 promotion. Lewis threw him down and landed hard punches on the ground to knock him out. Lewis has weaknesses in his game, but he hits really hard and this win may have upped his standing to where he'll face a name fighter next. Lewis got \$50,000 for the win and Grabowski got \$17,000 for the loss.

6. Joshua Burkman (29-12, 1 no contest) beat K.J. Noons (12-8, 1 no contest) on straight 30-27 scores in a lightweight fight. Burkman dropped to lightweight, cutting 18 pounds in one day after mostly fighting at welterweight. Crowd booed the fight as Noons did almost nothing until he started

throwing a few punches late in the round, so Burkman mostly used low kicks and body kicks. Second round the crowd booed as well, with Burkman using a high slam and more low kicks. Noons landed a nice left hook. Ref John McCarthy pretty much told both guys to do something at the start of the third round. Burkman looked tired and Noons was landing more. Burkman worked for a takedown and Noons threw elbows to him as he tried, although Burkman did get him down. I had Noons winning the round, but it was close and all three judges gave all three to Burkman. The crowd didn't like the fight. Burkman got \$90,000 for the win and Noons got \$34,000 for the loss.

7. Mike Pyle (27-11-1) beat Sean Spencer (12-5) at 4:25 of the third round in a welterweight fight. This was really a hell of a fight. Spencer won the first round as he knocked Pyle down with a right. Pyle hurt Spencer to start the second round, and landed punches and a spinning back fist. Pyle also got a takedown late in the round so it appeared even going into the third round. Spencer came in with punches. In a weird spot, Spencer landed good punches and Pyle acted like he was rocked, but seconds later it was clear he was playing possum trying to goad Spencer into coming in and trying to finish and he'd counter. The problem is in a close fight, if the judges don't figure out you're faking being rocked, that could have spelled the difference. Pyle took him down and went for a guillotine. Pyle late hurt him with an elbow, and threw lots of knees over and over before ref Yves Lavigne stopped the fight. Pyle got \$156,000 for the win, which included a \$50,000 best fight bonus. Spencer got \$67,000 for the loss, which included his best fight bonus.

8. Misha Cirkunov (11-2) beat Alex Nicholson (6-2) at 1:28 of the second round in a light heavyweight fight. Nicholson had asked his girlfriend to marry him right before weighing in. She was on stage with him and she said, "Yes." This may not have been the week to do so. Cirkunov was much bigger. Nicholson weighed in at 201 as a light heavyweight and looked to be giving up about 25 pounds once the fight started. Cirkunov just beat him up, landing a lot of punches and scoring two takedowns in the first round. In the second round, Cirkunov took him down, got his back, landed punches and used a neck crank. You could hear a nasty pop when he had the neck crank which ended up being Nicholson getting a broken jaw. Yeah, not the best weekend for an engagement. Cirkunov got \$24,000 for the win and Nicholson got \$10,000 for the loss.

9. Joseph Benavidez (24-4) beat Zach Makovsky (19-7) on scores of 30-27, 29-28 and 29-28 in a flyweight fight. This was Benavidez's fifth straight win since his title loss to Demetrious Johnson. He's generally considered No. 2 in the division behind Johnson, but since Johnson has beaten him twice, he's been passed over for another title shot. At this point, if Johnson beats Henry Cejudo on 4/23, Benavidez really should get the next shot. Benavidez out struck him for the entire first round, but Makovsky did get three takedowns. The first two times Benavidez got right up, but the third time Makovsky got his back. The second round was more of the same, but Benavidez didn't dominate the standup and Makovsky got two more takedowns. I had this round for Makovsky. In the third round, Benavidez dominated with punches, knocking Makovsky off balance as time ran out. Benavidez got \$118,000 for the win and Makovsky got \$19,000 for the loss.

10. Ovince Saint Preux (19-7) beat Rafael Feijao Cavalcante (12-7, 1 no contest) on scores of 30-27, 30-27 and 29-28 in a light heavyweight fight. I can't see where Cavalcante could have won a round and it could have been 30-26 with a 10-8 third. Cavalcante fought like a short fighter. Saint Preux messed up his ankle early in the first round and could barely stand or move. As the fight went on, he explained he was hurt and said he turned off the pain receptors because he actually moved

okay after. Early on it looked like he was in bad trouble because he had no mobility. But he knocked Cavalcante down in the first round and landed a hard elbow and body punches as he kept him down. Saint Preux dominated the second round, knocking Cavalcante down with a left and landing a lot of punches from the top. Saint Preux had blocked out the pain by the third round. Cavalcante started throwing big punches but Saint Preux landed more and took him down, and held him down. The crowd booed it a lot. Saint Preux held him down and did nothing for so long there should have been a stand-up, but Saint Preux then got busy throwing a lot of punches late. It was close to being stopped when time ran out. Saint Preux got \$102,000 for the win and Cavalcante got \$42,000 for the loss.

11. Roy Nelson (22-12) beat Jared Rosholt (14-3) on scores of 30-27, 30-27 and 29-28 in a heavyweight fight. Boring fight. Rosholt couldn't take Nelson down, although he never really tried, and his standup isn't that good. Rosholt outlanded Nelson 13-6 in the round so I'm not sure how two judges gave it to Nelson. In the second round, Nelson was moving forward but not landing much. Nelson slipped throwing a punch. The crowd was booing this fight as well. Really this fight and the last fight made for one boring hour. Nelson landed enough to take the round. In the third round, Nelson landed some and Rosholt danced away and even ran away once. Nelson clearly won the third round but the crowd heavily booed both when it was over, and keep in mind Nelson is from Las Vegas and usually a big crowd favorite. Nelson got \$125,000 for the win and Rosholt got \$33,000 for the loss.

12. Stephen Wonderboy Thompson (12-1) beat Johny Hendricks (17-4) in 3:31 of a welterweight fight. The difference in Hendricks' size was really noticeable. Hendricks moved in a went for a takedown but Thompson was able to block it. Thompson had been working heavily on takedown defense. From that point Thompson went to work with a side kick, a head kick, and more side and head kicks. He was just taking Hendricks apart. It was shocking to see Hendricks basically doing nothing but stand there and get nailed with punches, kicks and knees. He was destroying Hendricks with punches, landed a spin kick and finished him with punches. Thompson got \$98,000 for the win including his \$50,000 performance bonus while Hendricks got \$100,000 for the loss.

Raw on 2/15 did 3,462,000 viewers. It was the second lowest watched episode of the show outside of holidays or football season since early 1997, beating only the 3,371,000 viewers on 2/1.

But that number can't be viewed that negatively, given the declining numbers overall, a show headlined by Big Show vs. Braun Strowman (and while the third hour declined, I expected more of a decline), and competition with the Grammy Awards that did 24,951,000 viewers head-to-head.

The first hour did 3,661,000 viewers. The second hour did 3,537,000 viewers. The third hour did 3,233,000 viewers.

The male/female skew was 65.0/35.0 in 18-49 and 69.8/30.2 in 12-17.

In the different age groups, the show did a 1.15 in 12-17 (down 6.5 percent from the Daniel Bryan retirement show), 1.11 in 18-34 (down 15.3 percent), 1.31 in 35-49 (down 8.4 percent) and 1.33 in 50+ (identical to last week).

The 2/10 edition of Smackdown, even with advertising A.J. Styles vs. Chris Jericho, dropped

slightly to a 1.72 rating and 2,414,000 viewers (1.47 viewers per home) going against the Democratic presidential debate on CNN (4,119,000 viewers). It was third for the night on cable. Once again, Smackdown by percentage draws more adult women (55.0/45.0 male skew in 18-49, but 70/30 in 12-17) than Raw. By ages, the show did a 0.69 in 12-17 (down 11.5 percent), 0.61 in 18-34 (down 21.8 percent), 0.89 in 35-49 (down 3.3 percent) and 1.04 in 50+ (down 7.1 percent).

The 2/9 episode of Lucha Underground set a new record for the promotion, with the first run episode doing 136,000 viewers, breaking the record of 125,000 set the previous week. The immediate replay did 81,000 viewers, up slightly from 76,000 last week, but down from 85,000 in the first week. The average viewer was 48 years old, but the male/female split was 70/30, which is still higher than WWE, but more in line with other wrestling shows, as compared to the 95/5 the week before. What's also notable is that the 2/2 show only did 5.5 percent more viewers via DVR, meaning that even though this show airs on a several month tape delay, its audience is hardcore and most watch it live and very few watch it via DVR.

Total Divas on 2/8 fell to 810,000 viewers. It was the fourth lowest rated episode in the history of the show. Unlike pro wrestling, Total Divas is heavily skewed toward women with a 67.5/32.5 skew in 18-49s and 72.5/27.5 with teenagers. But unlike most wrestling shows, who do their biggest numbers with those above the age of 50, Total Divas did a 0.33 in 12-17, 0.37 in 18-34, 0.43 in 35-49 but only a 0.15 in 50+.

The 2/8 episode of Impact saw a decline in the 9 p.m. number for the first week from the U.K., headlined by Kurt Angle vs. Drew Galloway. The show did 276,000 viewers for the 9 p.m. show and 112,000 for the midnight replay. It was the lowest 9 p.m. showing since the first show on Pop.

This is the third issue of the current set. If you've got a (1) on your address label, because of last week's double issue, it means your Observer subscription expires with this issue.

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All letters to the editor, reports from live shows and any other correspondence pertaining to this publication should also be sent to the above address.

We also have copies of our latest book, "Tributes II," a 293-page hardcover full color book which features biographies right out of the pages of the Observer. Those featured are Wahoo McDaniel, Lou Thesz, Miss Elizabeth, Freddie Blassie, Road Warrior Hawk, Andre the Giant, Curt Hennig, Johnny Valentine, Davey Boy Smith, Terry Gordy, Owen Hart, Stu Hart, Gorilla Monsoon, The Sheik and Tim Woods. The book is available for \$12.95 plus \$3.50 for postage and handling in the U.S., \$20 for postage and handling in Canada and \$25 for postage and handling for the rest of the world.

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CMLL: With the Sunday shows not drawing well, Lucha Libre Elite, the sister promotion to CMLL, is moving its weekly Arena Mexico show to Wednesday nights. CMLL is going to move back to running Sundays, which means Arena Mexico will now have wrestling four nights per week, Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, plus there is the weekly Saturday night show at Arena Coliseo in Mexico City. The schedule change goes into effect in March with the first LLE show on a Wednesday being on 3/2

At this point the plan seems to be to keep the Friday night big show at Arena Mexico live on Claro Sports for Internet streaming even though TDN (Televisa Deportes Network) is taping the show for later viewing on television

The promotion signed a deal with Megacable in Mexico to carry the Tuesday night shows from Arena Mexico. They will air on a six-day delay, on Monday nights. Those shows are also streamed live on YouTube, as is the weekly Monday night show from Arena Puebla, so they are streaming for free three house shows per week

Claro Sports, the television station, not the internet site, will be airing the new Sunday CMLL shows on a tape delay

Brazo de Plata, better known as Super Porky, 52, returned to action on 2/16. He was apparently diagnosed with an irregular heartbeat in late December and experienced fatigue so took a short break. He returned in January, did one match, felt bad, and then took several more weeks off. The description was he looked in bad shape, and had gained even more weight during his time off. He is apparently contemplating retirement and there is a show on 3/6 in Monterrey billed as part of his retirement tour

There were a couple of injuries on the 2/16 Arena Mexico show. Zeuxis injured either her foot or ankle. She had an injured ankle last year that kept her out of action for a few months. Ultimo Dragoncito was dropped on his head with a double-arm piledriver. In a really bad idea, when the doctor came out Dragoncito noted he was really injured, the doctor rolled Dragoncito out of the ring to the floor so the match would continue. Isn't that the last thing you are supposed to do if someone suffered a neck injury

The 2/12 show at Arena Mexico drew 4,500 fans, headlined by Barbaro Cavernario & Mephisto & Negro Casas over Mascara Dorada & Mistico & Volador Jr. The third fall finish saw Mephisto pin Dorada with the Devil's Wings (pedigree) off the top rope, and then unmasked him. Mephisto had also pinned Dorada to win the first fall. Mephisto then challenged Dorada for his CMLL welterweight title, which will be on the 2/19 show. They had a Cibernetico & Mr. Niebla & Ultimo Guerrero win over Marco Corleone & Rush & Maximo when Maximo accidentally kissed Rush, which led to Rush being pinned. Dragon Lee and Kamaitachi tore it up in an underneath trios match

Besides the Dorada vs. Mephisto title match, the 2/19 show has Atlantis & Maximo Sexy & Valiente vs. Rush & Mascara & Corleone

The usual Saturday night show, on 2/13 at Arena Coliseo in Mexico City, was canceled because the Pope (as in the real Pope, not Elijah Burke), was in Mexico City

The Lucha Libre Elite show on 2/14 at Arena Mexico was headlined by Caristico vs. La Mascara and drew less than 1,500. Valentine's Day has been historically good for Arena Mexico, but the feeling is the Pope speaking killed the crowd. The match ended up each man tearing up the mask of the other. Each ended up unmasking the other and the match ended with both men wearing their opponents' mask and it ruled a no contest. Caristico then demanded an immediate one fall rematch, and the commission allowed it, and Caristico won clean with by using Mascara's own finisher, La Campana, on him. even with Rush trying to help Mascara. In the semi, Black Warrior & Marco Corleone & Rush beat Cibernetico & Lizmark Jr. (this weeks's big return) & Mephisto via DQ when the Cibernetico team beat down Rush and the referee. Lizmark Jr. wore his fathers' ring gear to honor him, minus the mask. He was said to have looked slow and old. The 2/21 show features Dragon Lee vs. Extreme Tiger (TNA's Tigre Uno) plus Super Crazy & Volador Jr. vs. Felino & Negro Casas. The reason it's low on star power is because LLE is also running in Monterrey with Caristico & Mistico vs. Cibernetico & Sharly Rockstar

The 2/15 show in Puebla drew 3,000 fans with Volador Jr. winning two of three falls from 56-year-old Casas to retain the NWA welterweight title in a very good match. Casas took both a superplex and a super Frankensteiner. Casas faked and sold a low blow. Ref Tirantes then asked the crowd if Volador had done a low blow, as with Tirantes looking at the crowd, Casas tried a low blow of his own, but Volador saw it coming and blocked it. Casas went for his La Magistral finisher, but

Volador blocked it in mid move and pinned him. The crowd threw money in after the match and both men issued challenges back-and-forth for a hair match, which may take place at the 3/18 Arena Mexico El Homenaje de Dos Leyendas show.

AAA: The new English language TV show called “AAA Lucha Libre Worldwide,” will be similar to New Japan World Pro Wrestling Returns on AXS. The show, which is being put together for distribution outside of Mexico, has announcers Chris Cruise and Hugo Savinovich doing taped commentary in studio on the AAA television show from Mexico. It’s a really tricky deal because the show can’t air in the U.S. because AAA signed exclusivity with Lucha Underground, but that deal doesn’t include other English speaking countries which is where the show will be marketed. There is also some question right now regarding the talent under contract with Lucha Underground and their ability to be on the show. One thing we do know is that Konnan was not allowed to announce even though he is dead on Lucha Underground (as in they announced he had died on the show). Maybe they don’t like the idea that somebody dead on one show appears on another

Rey Mysterio Jr.’s financial issues have been caught up but there are no dates announced to bring him back. The problem is with the devalued peso, the cost of paying him may be cost prohibitive except on a show like TripleMania where they are doing a big grossing house.

DRAGON GATE: Jimmy Susumu upset Shingo Takagi on 2/14 in Fukuoka before a sellout of 1,800 fans at Hakata Star Lanes to win the Open the Dream Gate championship. Susumu got the pin in 29:40, ending the reign of Takagi that started on 8/16 when he beat Masato Yoshino. This is Susumu’s second time with the company’s big belt, having first held it in 2006.

ALL JAPAN: 26-year-old Kento Miyahara became the youngest Triple Crown champion in history on 2/12 at Korakuen Hall when he pinned Zeus with a German suplex in 23:20 to win the title vacated on 1/12 when Suwama ruptured his Achilles tendon. The battle to create a new champion drew 983 fans. Takao Omori then challenged Miyahara for his first defense. Interestingly, Omori didn’t win on the undercard as he was in a six-man tag match where the outsiders group of Shuji Ishikawa & Ultimo Dragon & Shigehiro Irie beat Omori & Jun Akiyama & Masa Fuchi when Dragon pinned Fuchi with La Magistral. Also on the show, Yohei Nakajima retained the TV title pinning Yuma Aoyagi. Sushi, who was pinned in the opener by Soma Takao in the jr. tournament, came out to issue the next challenge. That was weird as well

The Champion Carnival tournament starts on 4/9 at Korakuen Hall. The A block has Miyahara, Nomura, The Bodyguard, Daisuke Sekimoto, Akiyama, Kengo Mashimo and Super Tiger. The B block has Zeus, Yutaka Yoshie, Omori, Jake Lee, Hideyoshi Kamitani (Big Japan), Ryoji Sai and Joe Doering. The crowd popped big when they announced Doering, who has been out of action since July due to knee surgery

Daichi Hashimoto, the son of Shinya Hashimoto, will be returning in March. Also headed in is Masashi Takeda, a death match style wrestler from Big Japan who also has an 11-4 MMA record, mostly with the Zst promotion

Kento Miyahara & Jake Lee earned the next world tag team title shot at Zeus & The Bodyguard. On the 2/13 show in Choshi, Miyahara & Lee upset former champions Akiyama & Omori when Miyahara pinned Akiyama clean. The title match will be on 2/21 at the smaller Edion Arena in Osaka. That show will also feature the championship match in the annual Junior Battle of Glory

tournament, which features A block winner Atsushi Aoki against B block winner Kazuki Hashimoto. The round-robin ended on 2/16 in Sayama, which is probably an apropos city for a junior tournament to end (Satoru Sayama was the person most responsible for the junior heavyweight division being popular in Japan). The A block ended with Aoki in first place with a 2-1 record, Soma Takao in second place and Sushi and Takeshi Minamino with zero points tied for third. The B block was Hashimoto in first place with a 2-1 record, Hikaru Sato and Atsushi Maruyama both 1-1-1 and Ryuji Hijikata in last place with a 1-2 record.

NEW JAPAN: Owner Takaaki Kidani said they are going to offer Kazuchika Okada a five-year contract, from April 2016 to April 2021, unheard of historically, because they want to build around him and make sure he doesn't go to WWE. He also said the company has earmarked a \$2 million marketing budget to make Okada a mainstream star. Kidani said that they are going to have to offer longer contracts to the top stars because they don't want to turn into WWE's minor league feeder system

After his win over Hirooki Goto, Okada did the old school line saying that "what we do in the ring is undoubtedly the best in the world. The guys who left NJPW are just wanting to do some easy going matches, or maybe they realized they can't beat me." Kazuo Yamazaki, one of the announcers, was critical toward Goto's performance in the title match saying, "Show us how you changed in the ring, not with a costume.

A.J. Styles, prior to signing with WWE, did one last interview for New Japan World that was posted this past week. He said it was a hard decision to leave New Japan, saying it was a great place to work and it was "the best two years of pro wrestling in my life." "The fans are some of the best in the world. Yes, they're different from American and U.K. fans. They're not as loud, but that's because they're paying attention, observing and loving everything that happens in the ring and it doesn't get any better than that." He said the last two year have allowed him to understand a different way of wrestling, and he made himself better by wrestling with some of the best in the world. When asked his best matches, he immediately said the Hiroshi Tanahashi match in the 2015 G-1 Climax tournament, and then said every singles match with Tanahashi and Okada as well as the Tokyo Dome match with Nakamura and the matches with Kota Ibushi.

HERE AND THERE: The cause of death of Brian Knighton (Axl Rotten) on 2/4 came back quicker than expected. The Chief Medical Examiner in Baltimore reported that Knighton's death was due to an accidental overdose. Knighton was found at 3:09 p.m. unconscious and not breathing on the bathroom floor of a McDonald's in Linthicum, MD, while on his way to the airport to fly to Australia to spend time with a fan who was paying his way over and to spend time with them. Police had found drug paraphernalia and a broken burnt tablespoon with a "crystalline residue" and capsules of a brownish substance that was believed to have been heroin was on top of the paper towel dispenser

Bret Hart had prostate cancer surgery on 2/10 in Calgary and came out of it well. They removed his prostate in the surgery and all indications at this point are that all the cancer was contained in the prostate so it was removed completely. The belief is there is no need for chemotherapy or radiation and he should make a full recovery. He wrote two days later: "Surgery's over and on the long road to recovery. I want to thank Dr. Hyndman and the nursing staff at Rocky View Hospital for an outstanding job. I also want to thank my family, friends and fans for all your love and support.

Things are looking up and I should be home in the next couple of days. In the words of Vince McMahon, 'it's onwards and upwards.' In recent years, Hart has had two knee replacement surgeries, the second of which had a longer than expected recovery time, two hernia operations, as well as surgery on his right elbow and a four-corners fusion of his right wrist in November that makes it very difficult to write or type. That surgery was actually more painful than the prostate surgery. Hart had actually known about the prostate cancer dating back to last summer, but had kept it quiet past the family, and didn't tell friends until just before he publicly released his statement. The doctors felt that since it was a slow growing cancer that he didn't need immediate surgery. They felt he should get the wrist surgery first, and then recover from it and get back in shape for this surgery, which was at first scheduled for January. Because the wrist was slow in recovering, he moved it back to late February, but it was then moved up two weeks because of concern from a test result. Hart was at the WWE house show on 2/5 in Calgary. We were told that he had told people how much trouble he was having with his wrist when it comes to writing. He worked the latter years of his career on bad knees and a bad wrist

A new group called Urshow.tv is putting together an iPPV on 3/20 from the Celebrity Theater in Phoenix with boxing, or something close to it, pro wrestling, grappling and MMA in the top four matches. Roy Jones Jr. doing a boxing match with a fan and if the fans beats him, he'll get \$100,000, plus a pro wrestling match with Kurt Angle vs. Rey Mysterio, an MMA fight with Ken Shamrock vs. Dan Severn (the two had a big rivalry in the mid-90s where Shamrock became the first UFC singles champion beating Severn, and then, in the worst match ever, a 30:00 match with about 28:00 of two statues eyeing each other, Severn got the decision to win the title), and a grappling match with Chael Sonnen vs. Michael Bisping (they had an MMA fight where Sonnen won a via close decision). It's been noted that the MMA match may not happen because Ken Shamrock is fighting Royce Gracie on 2/19, and if he's injured or put on a medical suspension, he wouldn't be able to fight. Severn hasn't fought in almost four years, and is now 57 years old. They are also doing a television show called the Republic of Sonnen, where Sonnen talks politics, and some shows with Rampage Jackson. They are paying significant guarantees to all the names involved, as Kurt Angle was planning to take a year off wrestling but was offered big money for the match. It's an attempt to use this to springboard an iPPV business, but the ceiling on iPPV is still pretty low. It would seem on the surface it has to be a major loss leader. The amount of money an iPPV can generate, particularly with no television building it up, and the high costs of talent guarantees doesn't sound like a positive. The head of programming for the company is Aaron Avruskin, who is the son of Milt Avruskin, who did television announcing for a number of promotions in the 70s and 80s in Canada, best known as the host of George Cannon's Superstars of Wrestling in Ontario and the very popular International Wrestling in Quebec in the 80s which had a several years of major success, and later announced a show called Pro Wrestling Canada which was Crockett Promotions footage edited for Canada

Pro Wrestling Guerrilla ran their "Bowie" (tribute to David Bowie) show on 2/12 in Reseda before the usual sellout of 400 fans. I don't know how quick this thing sold out but do know more people who tried to buy tickets than couldn't get them logging on immediate than those who were successful. Chuck Taylor pinned the debuting Dalton Castle with a roll-up. Castle was over like crazy to no surprise. Chris Hero pinned Trent Baretta after a tombstone piledriver in what was said to be a match of the year candidate. Jack Evans pinned Sami Callihan with a schoolboy. Adam Cole

pinned Andrew Everett. Zack Sabre Jr. beat Trevor Lee by submission. Speedball Mike Bailey beat Evil Uno with a kick to the head. Roderick Strong pinned Drew Galloway in the main event to keep the PWG title

PWG's next two shows, All-Star weekend, will be 3/4 and 3/5 in Reseda and are loaded lineups. The 3/4 show has Taylor vs. Lee, Hero vs. Marty Scurll, Baretta vs. Galloway, Strong vs. Mark Andrews in a non-title match, Kyle O'Reilly vs. Tommy End, Zack Sabre Jr. vs. Adam Cole and a main event of Young Bucks defending the PWG tag titles against IWGP jr. tag champs Ricochet & Matt Sydal. The second night has Taylor vs. Scurll, Andrews vs. Evil Player Uno, Galloway vs. Lee, Sydal & Ricochet vs. Hero & End (if Sydal & Ricochet win the night before this will be a tag title match), Baretta vs. Cole, Bucks vs. Fish & O'Reilly (if Bucks retain, this will be a tag title match) and Strong vs. Sabre Jr. for the tag titles

The Classic Wrestling Revolution group, which we noted Shane Douglas as point man has called wrestlers offering \$500 per week for ten week runs, stated they will be running seven shows per week, with Caesar's Entertainment Group in Las Vegas as their partner, starting in late April or early May. The goal is to run 343 live events per year, which would be more than any other promotion in the world except for CMLL. The goal is to employ 64 full-time wrestlers, giving the benefits of full-time employment, full health, dental, vision and disability and having a profit sharing program. The goal is to tape a weekly two hour show produced in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Japanese. They will be opening up a gym to train wrestlers called the Roddy Piper Athletic Center. Roddy Piper's wife Kitty and son Colt will be working for the company in some capacity

Mark Nulty, who founded the Wrestling Classics web site and message board and has been around pro wrestling in various capacities dating back more than three decades, passed away on 2/10, ironically 32 years to the day of the death of David Von Erich. He and I were actually best friends at that time when we were both sportswriters at the *Wichita Falls Times & Record News*. Nulty, who was 55, had started doing what in a sense would be the forerunner of today's podcasts or wrestling radio shows, "Ringside Live," which were audio cassette tapes that he would do covering wrestling in Texas and around the world. He was a subscriber to this publication from its first issue and very quickly, we traded tapes from promotions all over the world, so we were among the few people pretty much seeing television from every territory at the time. He had already started promoting area shows for Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling, which was difficult in itself because at that point World Class Championship Wrestling, the rival promotion, was a monster as this was the peak of the Freebirds vs. Von Erichs feud. In fact, he promoted Danny Hodge's final career match at the time, against Eric Embry. He considered Blanchard his business mentor. He did all kinds of things in wrestling over the years, from promoting, booking, announcing, ring announcing and refereeing in Texas, Georgia and Florida. He was very much instrumental in how my life changed in the early 80s. We actually first met before working together as I flew to Texas and he, myself and Norman Dooley (one of the funniest writers I've ever read and whose newsletters were a major catalyst of starting the Observer) saw Blanchard's world title tournament when they were on the USA Network, and a Paul Boesch Houston Wrestling show during a weekend when the two warring promotions ran on successive nights. He was also the ring announcer that weekend as Blanchard attempted to run in Fort Worth, which was pretty much the

base of World Class as they taped television there every Monday night. The show, which had a pretty great main event, drew about 400 people and Terry Funk still put on a performance like he was in the main event at Budokan Hall. I don't remember his opponent, but it may have been Adrian Adonis, who had won the tournament and was the champion. Nulty was the ring announcer, and it may have been his first ring announcing gig, so he was out there when he'd announce guys, announce the guys as "the former so and so champion," so Funk comes out, and by 1983, he'd held so many titles that it was probably the longest ring announcement for a wrestler I'd ever heard because he went and announced something like "former" for about 15 or more different championships. I think we told him after that he did a good job, but maybe next time with Funk, just saying "former world champion" would be enough. That would have the same weekend where we also both met Larry Matysik for the first time, as he had broken away from the St. Louis Wrestling Club and was running opposition and in Texas working on a business deal with Blanchard for talent, just prior to his ending up with WWF when it started its national expansion. He ended up moving to San Antonio, and for a time was the host of Texas All-Star Wrestling, the promotion that was South Texas' home group, after Southwest Championship Wrestling folded. It was where a tag team called The American Force, consisting of Shawn Michaels & Paul Diamond, got their first career push. Nulty on occasion would be on AWA television. After Stanley Blackburn passed away, Joe Blanchard replaced him as the figurehead AWA President, who would on occasion have to make decisions. So when Gagne needed an outside authority figure to make a ruling, Blanchard would do a taped interview, often with Nulty. He did announcing gigs over the years for a number of different promotions, including being one of the earlier announcers on Ring of Honor DVDs. He ended up in Ocala, FL, working as an advertising account executive, while he continued as a ring announcer and referee for Dory Funk Jr.'s BANG wrestling dating back to 1999. He continued doing that until recently. Funk Jr. at one of his shows recently gave him the "Fighting Heart" award, for doing the most with his God given ability. He gave a wonderful speech about when he grew up as a little kid his favorite wrestler was Dory Funk Jr., and he later got to work with him for so many years and that the worst day he ever had in the wrestling business was better than his best day not in it. As I recall, his favorite wrestlers were Dory Funk Jr., Jack Brisco, Lou Thesz and Danny Hodge and he ended up friends with all of them. Nulty actually refereed some of the first career matches of both Lita and Mickie James. Life takes people in different directions, but I'd still post on his web site, which is the only one except my own that I'd do something like that on, and would get phone messages or e-mails from him from time-to-time. We talked a lot when Jack Brisco and Joe Blanchard passed away. The irony of Blanchard and me being inducted together into the Hall of Fame this year probably meant he'd be there for sure, more for Blanchard who was like his father figure. Just a few days before his death, and he did know the end was coming soon, he sent a photo of us doing football picks out through social media and it made the rounds and it was kind of funny. According to Paul Herzog, one of his best friends, about a year ago he had a cough that wouldn't go away, and eventually had it checked up on, and was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer. He started on chemotherapy and six months ago got the good news that the cancer was in remission. But it never fully went away, and in a checkup a few months later, the cancer came back worse, having spread to his stomach. He underwent another round of chemotherapy as well as taking other drugs, but this time it had no effect. About a month ago, he got the word that the cancer had spread to his brain and that the end was near. He had a wife, Erin, and a four-year-old son Evan

Chuck Marlowe, a longtime sportscaster in Indianapolis who was the voice of wrestling in that city during the 60s, passed away this past week at the age of 86. Marlowe was best known locally as the host of "The Bob Knight" show, working with the legendary University of Indiana basketball coach, which aired for 29 years. He started as the lead announcer for Indiana basketball in 1958 on Ch. 4 and then became the station's newscaster and sports director. When Jim Barnett began doing a local television show in Indianapolis on Ch. 4, WTTV, Marlowe, as the most popular sports announcer on the station, was picked to be the host. After Dick the Bruiser and Wilbur Snyder essentially stole the territory from Barnett when Barnett went to Australia in 1964 and formed the WWA, Marlowe remained the announcer for a number of years

Brooke Adams, 31, who was Miss Tessmacher in TNA before, announced on 2/14 that she was expecting her first child with boyfriend Weston Wayne

The Cauliflower Alley Club's annual reunion is 4/11 to 4/13 at the Gold Coast Hotel in Las Vegas. The awards update is that, as was previously announced, Trish Stratus will be getting the Iron Mike Mazurski award, which is the group's top award. She will be the first woman ever honored in that way. Arn Anderson will be getting the Lou Thesz/Art Abraham Lifetime Achievement Award. Other honorees announced thus far as Paul Orndorff, Ken Patera, Greg Gagne & Jim Brunzell as a tag team, Pepper Martin (as an actor/wrestler), Lance Russell (announcer), James Beard (referee award) and Sue Aitchison of WWE (Jason Sanderson Humanitarian award).

LUCHA UNDERGROUND: All financial issues between Rey Mysterio Jr. with both Lucha Underground and AAA have been gotten up to date. The company is once again going to have to raise money or sign deals bringing in more money for a fourth season, but they've got about a year to do it since they are said to have the money for the next season of tapings through mid-May. When that is done, will have all their television taped through the summer of 2017. The company is trying to get a Lucha Underground movie produced for 2018 but people are skeptical that a brand on television with barely 130,000 viewers per week (the general feeling is that the replay show is mostly people watching originally staying to watch it a second time) would be strong enough to springboard a successful movie. According to one company source, the amount of money lost thus far is, after two seasons, slightly less than half of what TNA had lost after ten years in business

Super Luchas reported that Mysterio had only signed a one season deal, although we had been told it was a two season deal, and have gotten confirmation of that both with someone with the company and someone close to Mysterio. Unless there is a contract breach, he will be back for the next season of Lucha Underground. There are options in place in the deal where it can be extended to four seasons. Whether they'll be able to afford him after season two, or they'll even be around, and given his situation and what he would want to do at the time, will all play into whether it goes forward. Everyone on both sides are working with the idea he'll be back for the next season. The notable thing is that the Lucha Underground deals in most cases prohibit the talent from appearing on television with a rival promotion until after the season airs, not until after the tapings end. Based on that, if Mysterio is back for the next season, the earliest he could go to WWE or TNA (not that he would) could be the summer of 2017. We're checking on whether that would apply in this instance, but the impression we were given is that if the deal isn't breached in some way, that he would be unable to return to WWE until that time. .. The general feeling is the announcement on the show this past week that Konnan had died was the McLean Stevenson memorial FU on the way out

(McLean Stevenson was one of the stars of the TV show MASH, and quit the show, with most feeling he was going to do a takeoff on his popular character to do a new show, which he was, since the storyline was that his service in Korea was over and he was flying home. In his last episode, unbeknownst to him or anyone not with the show, the closing scene after he'd gotten on the plane to go home and everyone said their goodbyes is his plane was shot on the way out and there were no survivors). The general feeling is the creative team is unbelievably thin-skinned, as noted also by the reaction to Jim Cornette at TripleMania, and Konnan was critical of their pet men vs. women idea like it's some breakthrough concept and doing a mask vs. mask match and other stip matches on television with no storyline build-up

Luis Fernandez-Gil, who plays Dario Cueto, played a doctor on last week's episode of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia"

Notes from the 2/9 television show. The show was easy to watch. Aspects of the show are really growing on me, and I don't mean like fungus. Matt Striker & Vampiro are starting to really gel, with Vampiro's being excited while still playing that legend who can come back for a brawl at any moment character. The opener was really bad, though, but at least it was short. Bengala, who is Ricky Marvin under the mask, faced Kobra Moon, who is a Northern California woman wrestler better known as Thunder Rosa. She's really green and not ready. Bengala can carry someone, but her offense looked terrible, and it was even worse since she went over, which looked stupid. Luckily it only went 2:46, ending when Bengala went for a moonsault, Kobra got her knees up and then clamped on a dragon sleeper and put Bengala out. This is one of those cardinal mistakes of promoters where you come up with a character you want to push, and then try to find someone to play it. Now granted, that worked great when you pick Aaron Rodriguez to play Mil Mascaras in the 60s, but today the person given the push has to be ready for the push, particularly if you're booking a woman to beat a guy, unless they work it the right way, it looks stupid. Anyway, this match sucked in multiple different ways, starting with conceptually. Catrina was in her office. Fenix came in and he wanted another match with King Cuerno. The good thing is you can never get too much Fenix vs. Cuerno. It's like if they did skits in 1982 and Tiger Mask stormed in and said I want another match with Dynamite Kid. Catrina then confronted Cuerno. She was mad at him, noting that he won the title (Gift of the Gods title) but didn't destroy the man. It's such a kick listening to Cuerno speak perfect English. They also teased a future angle because she said even the best hunter will fall to Mil. Cuerno's gimmick is he's a hunter, she wasn't making an inside reference to the idea that 76-year-old Mil Mascaras still wouldn't job to HHH at WrestleMania like Sting did. But, she noted, that we are still on the side. She told him to kill Fenix, yes, kill him, in a last luchador standing match which is our main event, and noted that he doesn't even have to put the title on the line. She told him to make sure that bird never flies again. Jack Evans pinned Drago in 10:06. The match wasn't that smooth but there were definitely cool spots. At one point Vampiro mentioned that Evans' offense has been "pretty ugly," which seemed to have double meaning, because he was using heel tactics. Evans won with a backslide while putting both feet on the ropes. Evans then got on the announcers' table and cut a promo, saying he's now Jack "The Dragon Slayer" Evans. We had a video of El Texano Jr. They pushed him as the youngest AAA champion in history. He noted that he's feuding with Chavo Guerrero Jr. and Blue Demon Jr. They showed him working at a ranch. He's playing the good looking cowboy guy and they note that even though he's from a wrestling family, he didn't grow up rich and had to work for everything. Anyway, he was hanging at the

saloon and these masked guys showed up. One thing I've learned is no matter where you go, if you're in a dark alley, a bar, or hanging out on the street, in a parking lot, when a bunch of masked guys show up two things are clear. They are going to start a fight, but they can't fight for shit. Texano cleaned all of their clocks and then broke his glass with his beer with his bare hands. Catrina showed up to talk to Puma. What we learned from this segment is that Konnan is dead. He was in a casket and he had some dying words. Puma still doesn't talk. They announced Puma vs. Pentagon Jr. next week. The main event saw Fenix beat Cuerno in 11:20 in the last man standing match. If you like high flying matches, this was for you. This was in the **** range. Fenix missed a tope. Cuerno threw him head-first into the post hard. I'm not a fan of a clunking or clanging sound when heads meets immovable metal object. Fenix did a corkscrew plancha to the floor. He did another crazy dive and Cuerno barely beat the count. Cuerno came back his with his arrow tope, still the world's greatest. It ended up with both men climbing up a wall that went to the upper deck. Fenix knocked Cuerno off the wall. He grabbed a ladder and while holding the ladder which steadied his fall, he crashed through a table. You can't top that one and he didn't beat the ten count. The final segment showed a new pretty girl named Captain Vazquez. She's the head of some futuristic police unit and we found out that Ricky Reyes is not just a Luchador, but he's actually an undercover cop designed to capture Dario Cueto. Given that he was doing Cueto's dirty work and around him the entire first season, it's not like he hasn't had a chance to arrest the guy. In this conversation we've learned that Demon Jr. has retired to Miami, so I guess he's not coming back. At least they didn't tell us they killed him. Vazquez wanted to know where Cueto was and Officer Reyes said that nobody has seen him for months. Reyes said he wanted to bring him in when his brother murdered Bale. But she told him that this case was a lot bigger than some street thug getting killed and "You're in too deep." So she said she was assigning a new officer to work with him, Officer Joey Ryan. Next thing you know we'll have police officers telling criminals to grab their dick and then use it for judo throws, which, by the way, will happen before the end of the season. So Ryan and Reyes are the Buddy Cops who don't like each other. But, they're undercover. They had to go to the Temple, but when they get there, nobody can know that they know each other and in fact, have to pretend to hate each other. But their mission is to arrest and bring in Dario Cueto. Man, when his monster brother finds out about it reading the Internet, he's going to standing shooting star both of them to death (a play on the immortal line by Urijah Faber to Dominick Cruz when Cruz was acting tough to him, "What are you going to do, Dominick, decision me up.":)

ROH: The 2/26 PPV show is sold out at Sam's Town Casino in Las Vegas, although the capacity for the show is only 700 tickets. There are tickets left for the TV tapings the next day

Kevin Keenan, who worked as a referee and part of the ring crew before being let go at the 2/6 tapings in Nashville, released a long statement regarding his firing. He said that after they finishing working at the arena, setting it up the night before the tapings, he and another member of the crew went to "Tootsie's," in Nashville. While walking down the street, they ran into some of the talent, and he admitted that he did smack one of the women on the butt, and claimed it was good natured and she good natured shoved him in the chest. He claimed booker Hunter Johnston was right there when it happened (other versions were that he was there but didn't see it and was told about it, and another said he wasn't there and was told about it but he was there) and they shook hands and he said nothing. He said 30 minutes later, he got a text from someone with the company saying "Please tell me you didn't mess up. Just tell me that." He said the morning of the show, at 11 a.m., he saw

Johnston again and asked to talk to him and apologized for what happened. He said they talked and Johnston told him to do your thing and that they would talk later. He said he then talked for ten minutes to the woman who he slapped on the butt and apologized and thought it was settled. He said he participated in pull-aparts during the tapings. He said after the show, when they were almost done loading up the ring truck at 1:30 a.m., he was told Johnston wanted to see him. Johnston told him he wasn't going to use him any longer

Another report from an eye witness said about 16 or so people from ROH were on the strip in Nashville, including Keenan, the woman in question and Johnston. The person told us that Keenan did slap the woman on the butt even though he was in the room, and wasn't told about it until the next night after the tapings. She had gone to several other ROH stars and asked what she should do and they told her they would support her and then she went to Johnston. He was then let go after the tapings were over. What isn't correct in last week's report is that the firing took place in from of talent and crew. It took place after the show and most of the people had left. There were a few people who hadn't left and the ring crew was still tearing down the building but weren't there and a few witnesses but it wasn't a scene or anything like that in front of all the talent, although there was talent there

While only two matches have been announced at press time, Kenny Omega vs. ACH and Kushida vs. Adam Cole, the reports from those who have seen the lineup are that the 2/27 tapings in Las Vegas from a match and talent standpoint may be the most stacked four episodes in company history. All the New Japan talent at the PPV will be working the tapings.

TNA: Raquel (Gabi Castrovinci) and her injuries in one of her first matches made TMZ where she said she suffered a cracked tooth and had to get a root canal and a crown on her tooth and had a hairline fracture of her jaw working an independent show in Miami when her opponent gave her a beating. She claimed she was attacked during a match on an indie show because there was jealousy of her having gotten a "huge contract" with TNA. Melissa Anderson of Lucha Underground wrote about this, "Real pro wrestlers don't go to TMZ when they get a boo boo."

UFC: Ronda Rousey was back training for the first time this past week. She was also chosen to be on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue which comes out this week. They are doing three different covers, with Rousey, Ashley Graham and Hailey Clauson

Rousey was on Ellen DeGeneras on 2/16 promoting the cover and ended up getting a ton of press for talking about how, when she was in the training room after her loss to Holly Holm, she thought that how everything she worked for was gone and she felt worthless and at first wanted to kill herself but then saw boyfriend Travis Browne and said he she wanted to have his babies so had to stay alive. She's also filed for a trademark on the phrase "F*** them all," which likely means she's looking at it for merchandising in some form

Fight Pass numbers are doing really well. UFC officials never comment on the service as a private company but within the industry it had been believed to be at about one-third of the WWE network in terms of growth, but it's now closer to one-half, and had that growth without cannibalizing PPV at all. The expectation is a big growth spurt at the end of this month with the Anderson Silva vs. Michael Bisping show from London on 2/27

Alistair Overeem, who was a free agent, has signed with UFC and is expected to return on the 5/8

show in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, where it would make sense, since he's from grew up in Holland, for him to headline against one of the top tier heavyweights like Cain Velasquez, Andrei Arlovski, Josh Barnett or possibly a revenge match against Travis Browne, who beat Overeem in their last meeting

Aljamain Sterling has also signed a new long-term deal after his contract expired and he was testing free agency. Unlike Overeem, who it was expected would get a significant offer from Bellator, there didn't seem to be major Bellator interest in Sterling, a rising bantamweight who doesn't have a big name. Sterling, 26, announced his decision on 2/15 on the MMA Hour, saying he's 100 percent happy and signed for more than his original offer of a \$20,000 guarantee and \$20,000 win bonus. Sterling said he did get an offer from Bellator, as well as World Series of Fighting, and he said the WSOF offer was "neck and neck" with Bellator. We had been told, and Scott Coker later said publicly, that Bellator never made an offer for Sterling. Overeem said that he never talked to Bellator, which is a play on words, because his reps did but he didn't directly. Bellator never put an offer on the table for Overeem because evidently his UFC offer way high enough or what his reps were asking was high enough that Bellator didn't even bother to counter with an on-paper offer. Sterling has a 12-0 record with recent wins over Takeya Mizugaki and Johnny Eduardo

Travis Tygart, the head of USADA, told reporter Jeremy Botter that they are now using a new test for HGH that can detect usage going back 21 days instead of just hours. The one thing when it comes to drug testing is things often get said like this and sometimes they are accurate and sometimes they aren't. The earliest drug testing in the U.S. was known as the sink test, in which they collected specimens and poured them all down the sink. The reality is they didn't have a test, but figured if athletes thought there was, they'd get scared and get clean. Obviously that ends up killing credibility in the long run even if there may be short-term value. If we start seeing a lot more HGH failures not just in MMA, but throughout sports, then they have a new and better test. If we don't, then we should be skeptical. As of right now, since July, there hasn't been one HGH test failure in UFC. The only suspension related to HGH was Mirko Cro Cop, and that's because when he was given a surprise test and knew he'd just taken a shot, so he went to UFC and USADA and admitted use hoping for forgiveness, and then publicly retired feeling that it would avoid his name being linked with HGH. Instead, he was suspended for two years, but, and this isn't a surprise at all, he didn't test positive for HGH

The Nevada Athletic Commission announced on 2/17 that they were suspending Wanderlei Silva for three years. Originally Silva, 39, was given a lifetime ban, but Nevada courts ruled that as excessive and told the commission to give him punishment more in line. Silva was also fined \$70,000. Silva's suspension dates back to his running away from a drug test on May 24, 2014, meaning he is eligible to fight again in commission states on May 25, 2017. This would ban him from the U.S., Canada and Brazil, but not in Japan or Europe. UFC has already released him and Bellator would be interested in him, but that would not be looked at positively for them to use him on overseas shows while they still do business in commission states. A promotion like Rizin could use him, or he could do pro wrestling in Japan, although the market for MMA stars doing pro wrestling is way down with the decline of the IGF

This week's show is a Sunday 2/21 card that goes head-to-head with Fast Lane. The show starts at 5:15 p.m. with Fight Pass bouts with Shamil Abdurakhimov vs. Anthony Hamilton, Sarah Moras vs.

Lauren Murphy and Ashlee Evans-Smith vs. Marion Reneau. The rest of the show is on FS 1 starting at 7 p.m. with Nathan Coy vs. Jonavin Webb, Oluwale Bamgbose vs. Daniel Sarafian, Alex Garcia vs. Sean Strickland, Shane Campbell vs. James Krause, Chris Camozzi vs. Joe Riggs, Cody Garbrandt vs. Augusto Mendes, Dennis Bermudez vs. Tatsuya Kawajiri, Derek Brunson vs. Roan Carneiro and headlined by Donald Cerrone vs. Alex Oliveira in the battle of the cowboys

There were three late changes in the show over the past few days. The Siyar Bahadurzada vs. Brandon Thatch fight is off the show and will be rescheduled on a future show due to a medical clearance issue regarding Thatch. Thatch was using a medication that UFC and USADA had cleared, and would be legal in most states to use including Nevada, but it is against the bylaws of the Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission. So it's being moved back two weeks to the 3/5 show in Las Vegas. The John Lineker vs. Cody Garbrandt fight scheduled for the show fell through when Lineker pulled out six days before the fight due to being ill with dengue fever, a tropical disease caused by mosquito bites. The company was able to get Augusto Mendes, a multi-time BJJ world champion who is 5-0 with four submissions, as the replacement. Mendes was signed to fight in January, but suffered a rib injury almost immediately after signing and hasn't debuted with the company. The Leonardo Augusto Guimares vs. Trevor Smith fight is off because Smith suffered a hand injury in training, also six days out. No word on whether new opponents will be chosen for Garbrandt and Guimares, but at such late notice, it'll be very difficult

According to an article on the bankruptcy hearings of Ronda Rousey's coach, Edmond Tarverdyan, on Bloodyelbow.com, Tarverdyan in November had listed \$0 in average monthly income while filing for bankruptcy, apparently later admitted that he made somewhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000 this past year as Ronda Rousey's coach. At an earlier hearing he had claimed that what was thought to be his gym, the Glendale Fighting Club, he had claimed that he used to own it but couldn't afford to run it so one of his students has owned it for five or six years, but it later came out that his wife is actually the owner of the gym

Gleison Tibau announced that he's not going to appeal his drug test failure for EPO in a USADA out-of-competition test. He's suspended for two years. Tibau failed an out of competition test for EPO after his 11/7 win over Abel Trujillo in Sao Paulo. He also failed a test taken the day of the fight for a banned substance that has not been revealed. Tibau was in line for a number of UFC records, and the two years off will set him back. He has 17 career wins in the UFC, tied with Michael Bisping for third place behind Georges St-Pierre (19) and Matt Hughes (18). He's tied with Frank Mir for second place for most UFC fights with 26, behind Tito Ortiz with 27. And he was in sixth place all-time for most UFC time in combat, behind Frankie Edgar, St-Pierre, B.J. Penn, Ortiz and Bisping

Rafael Natal vs. Robert Whittaker, Yair Rodriguez vs. Andre Fili (which is a real god fight), Jessica Aguilar vs. Juliana Lima and Clint Hester vs. Marcos Rogerio de Lima have been added to the 4/23 show in Las Vegas

Julian Erosa vs. Teruto Ishihara was announced for the 3/5 PPV show in Las Vegas, likely in a prelim

Rin Nakai vs. Leslie Smith and Ben Ngyuyn vs. Justin Scoggins have been added to the 3/20 show in Brisbane, Australia

Lukasz Sajewski has pulled out of his 2/27 London fight with Teemu Packalen. He'll be replaced by Thibault Gouti, who is 11-0 with nine stoppages, six by submission,, and will be making his UFC debut in the lightweight fight

Invicta announced a 3/11 show at the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas on Fight Pass. The matches announced are Ayaka Hamasaki (the atom weight, or 105 pound champion) defending her title against Amber Brown, Vanessa Porto vs. Jennifer Maia for the interim flyweight title (champion Barb Honchack is injured), plus Jessamyn Duke of the Four Horsewomen will face Irene Aldana, Alex Grasso (7-0, who has star potential in UFC as a strawweight) faces Stephanie Eggink, plus former TUF fighter Roxanne Modaferrri faces DeAnna Bennett, former atomweight champion Herica Tiburcio (who won the title from Michelle Waterson at the end of 2014 before losing it to Hamasaki) will face Jinh Yu Frey, Sara D'Alelio vs. Andrea Lee, Kelly McGill vs. Amberlynn Orr and Ashley Greenway vs. Sarah Click.

BELLATOR: What will likely be one of the company's most-watched shows in history is on 2/19 features a five-fight main card with Daniel Pineda vs. Emmanuel Sanchez, Melvin Guillard vs. Derek Campos, Emanuel Newton vs. Linton Vassell, Kimbo Slice vs. Dada 5000 and Royce Gracie vs. Ken Shamrock. Gracie vs. Shamrock is a rematch from two fights in the early days of UFC. On the first UFC event on November 12, 1993, a tournament, the favorites were Gracie and Shamrock because they were the only two with significant ground experience and the tournament was filled with stand up fighters who had never fought people with takedowns. Gracie was way ahead of the game, knowing Jiu Jitsu since childhood while Shamrock gave from essentially the Wigan catch wrestling submission style, from Karl Gotch to Masami Soranaka, who taught Shamrock, and from Masakatsu Funaki and Minoru Suzuki, who were Gotch students and also taught Shamrock. Gracie won in 57 seconds. Shamrock now said that there was a huge difference in fighting without boots, which he learned, as with boots his ankle locks and heel hooks were more effective. The rematch, on April 7, 1995, did 282,000 buys on PPV and was the biggest non-boxing sports event ever on PPV up to that point in time, amazing given UFC got no mainstream media coverage and no television. They went 36:06, the longest fight in UFC history, before it was stopped due to the time limit. Shamrock's claim is that he thought it was going to be a no time limit match. The match was mostly boring with Shamrock holding Gracie down and not doing much damage. But Shamrock did land a big punch on Gracie, busting him open, and threw a lot of head-butts to the area, messing up the area around Gracie's eye. Shamrock did far more damage and Gracie retired from UFC after that fight. In those days there were no judges, but if there had been, Shamrock would have won. Gracie claimed it as a win saying that he survived for more than 30 minutes with a guy 40 pounds heavier (there were no weigh-ins in those days, but I'd say Shamrock was 205 (that was the weight he told me he was at the time), although he now says he was 199, while Gracie was in the 178-180 range). For the last 20 years, Shamrock has been trying for a rematch. He said that whenever serious talks happened, Gracie either made a demand that Shamrock cut to 185, or asked for so many millions that the fight fell apart. Gracie said it never got to a serious negotiating place. Shamrock believes that when he looked so terrible against Kimbo Slice, that immediately Gracie made it clear he'd face Ken and Bellator made the fight. Gracie thinks that Shamrock's only chance would be to land a big punch early, because he feels he's in tons better condition than Shamrock and is a better grappler. Gracie is 49 and Shamrock just celebrated his 52nd birthday.

WWE: A few more notes regarding Bryan Danielson and some of the things going around and misconceptions. Regarding the convulsions, the story going around that he hid convulsions from doctors in an attempt to get cleared to wrestle is absolutely not true. I believe he had four convulsions after concussions, the last being about four years ago. Every doctor involved was aware, and he was given full clearance to do anything, and he was actively training hard very recently. It is logical, and probable, that one of the reasons, if not the main reason, Dr. Joseph Maroon wouldn't clear him is because Danielson made him aware of that. But the other doctors were also made aware of that and because they were so many years ago, did not see it as a concern. Danielson's remarks about hiding the convulsions stems from years ago, as when he did get them originally, he told nobody, not even his then-girlfriend Brie (this was before they were married, as they became a couple around early 2011), for fear they wouldn't let him wrestle. Brie was there when he had one later. It should be noted that no doctor, with the exception of Maroon, and I don't know what words Maroon told him past he wasn't going to clear him, told him to retire. Doctors who were highly regarded, and the UCLA doctors were among the best concussion doctors in the country, told him he was fine to do anything he wants. The doctor who conducted the test that led to him deciding to retire never told him to retire, only pointed out that he did have an existing problem that he was previously unaware of. But he made a decision that if there was something wrong he wouldn't continue. He did never publicly talk about having convulsions until the ESPN interview on 2/9

Brie Bella, 32, confirmed on ABC's Good Morning America on 2/16 that she would be retiring. Both Danielsons were on the show talking about his retirement and she said, "It's time for me to hang up the boots. That day is very close." She wasn't on camera giving a time frame but the reporter said her announcement would be made this summer. As noted in last week's issue, she had made the decision to retire and start a family some time back, because her friends were aware of it well before Bryan decided to retire. Not only did Good Morning America do a piece on the Danielson retirement that day, but it was also one of the stories covered that night on "Nightline" with some of the same clips

Regarding Brie Bella and the rest of the women's division, right now there are plans for two women's matches on the WrestleMania card. Of course that can change, but one would be a title match and the other would be some kind of a match to get several of the other women on the show

Nakamura said about the subject, "I'm really shocked about Daniel Bryan's retirement. He is one of the reasons why I went to WWE.

Also related to Danielson, in a trivia note, it was Danielson who named the Evolve promotion. After Gabe Sapolsky was dropped by ROH as booker in 2009, he was going to start a new promotion based around the top stars of Dragon Gate and with Danielson as the face of the company. Danielson came up with the name "Evolve," but ended up signing with WWE before Evolve started

The suspension of O'Neil was changed from 90 days to 60 days. He was also fined \$5,000. WWE got some negative pub over it, including a ridiculous *New York Post* story written where they printed some tweets from fans who blamed the suspension on racism. I mean, you could argue that a drug test violation is 30 days and this was 60 days and I can't wrap my head as to why he's suspended in the first place, but racism? On the surface, the suspension seems ridiculous even though O'Neil's timing of wanting to get playful with Vince probably could have been better. In

talking with several in the company, nobody had anything close to a reasonable explanation why he would be suspended past the point Vince's reaction made Vince look bad, but it was a split second on TV and it was more of an overreaction of a guy who got panicked when somebody grabbed him. Vince was said to be furious about it, so that's what happened. After Bryan went to the back, as everyone else was disbursing and going to the back, O'Neil playfully grabbed Vince by the arm, and Vince, not knowing what was happening, shoved him, and it was caught on camera on the network just as they were going off the air. O'Neil later claimed he was just trying to have a "women go first" attitude and allow Stephanie to walk first ahead of both of them

Batista, who is good friends with O'Neil, wasn't happy about this and wrote on Twitter saying that he called O'Neil and told him to ask to be released. I know that sounds good at all, but this isn't the old days with lots of options. A guy like O'Neil is much better off in WWE than anywhere else. I wouldn't say that about everyone, but in his case I don't see where he can go the replicate the income

For Fast Lane on 2/21 in Cleveland, which has plenty of seats remaining, a rarity as most WWE PPVs these days sell out in advance, the lineup at press time is Reigns vs. Lesnar vs. Ambrose for the WrestleMania title shot at HHH, New IC champion Owens (who won it in a five-way on the 2/15 Raw) defending against Ziggler, Jericho vs. Styles, Charlotte vs. Brie Bella for the Divas title, Wyatt Family vs. Ryback & Show & Kane, Lynch & Banks vs. Naomi & Tamina, Edge & Christian "Cutting Edge" interview New Day, and the pre-show match will be a 2/3 fall U.S title match with Kalisto defending against Del Rio. Del Rio goes from complaining about not being in the main event at Ultima Lucha to being in the pre-show match

It's still weird that of the three guys in the main event, it probable that Lesnar will be cheered the most and a lock that Reigns will be booed the most, but unless they change directions, the story is Reigns winning and he's supposed to have face momentum against HHH (who the Mania face base is going to like because he's the guy in charge of NXT). It's never not interesting going into Mania

Sheamus returned to action on the 2/15 Raw show after being out with tendonitis in his left arm

Henry suffered a rib injury on the 2/15 Raw. Not sure exactly what happened. Big E had him up for the big ending, and Henry slipped off when he wasn't supposed to, was hurt and just got pinned. It was a weird looking ending. They didn't shoot it, but he was down for a while being attended to both during the post-match and commercial break. We don't know the severity of the injury other than the company stated he had sore ribs. Henry was laughing and joking around backstage after, so it didn't appear to be too serious

The only update on Finn Balor, who didn't work the NXT shows this week, is that he's resting and rehabbing his sprained ankle

Pro Wrestling Sheet reported that Barrett (Stuart Bennett, 35), who is not wrestling due to nerve issues in his neck, will not be renewing his contract when it expires in June. WWE nor Barrett as of press time had not confirmed nor denied that was the case, which is basically an unofficial confirmation. Barrett only said, "I'll comment further at a more appropriate time but for now I'm 100 percent focused on doing my job for WWE." I do know that Barrett had been interested in being a soccer analyst in the U.K. after his wrestling days were over. Barrett first signed with WWE in 2007 and was assigned to OVW, and later FCW, before being brought up in 2010 after winning

the first season of NXT. He had a good early run including headlining PPV shows with Cena, but the last few years his career had pretty well stalled, and been slowed by injuries

Lesnar, on the weekly SportsCenter segment on WWE on 2/16, admitted he had also had multiple concussions when talking about Danielson's retirement

"American Grit," the new FOX network reality show that Cena will host, that was filmed in Washington at the end of last year, debuts on 4/14, in the 9 p.m. Thursday night time slot, or head-to-head with Smackdown. One of the contestants on the show is Cam Zingami of Chaotic Wrestling in the Boston area

Cena sent out a cryptic tweet: "Gamble, take risky action in hope of a desired result. Time to gamble I think. It's gonna be a risky next two weeks." Obviously him being back for Mania, which would be way ahead of schedule for a torn rotator cuff (July or August would be the return for a normal human being), could be what he's talking about. Cena has on two occasions after surgeries (for a torn pec and for a torn triceps) come back months earlier than expected with the joke that he's got mutant healing powers, or something like that. If they expect Cena back, that would explain not getting any heels ready for Undertaker since Undertaker vs. Cena was on the books before Cena was injured and needed surgery. But right now, that is not the plan

There is a top of the WrestleMania card done, as we've been told Undertaker has a match. We don't know the opponent, other than being told the planned name isn't Cena, Owens, Lesnar or Strowman, and that it is someone who is not on the roster right now. Don't know if that starts the Sting rumors up, because that's the first name that would come to mind at this point, but Sting's neck has spinal stenosis, needs neck surgery, and he'll be 57 by that time. But they could always do a loser must retire match since undoubtedly that would be Sting's last match if such a bout were to happen

An angle for a proposed Stardust vs. Stephen Amell match at WrestleMania took place on 2/13 at the Comic Con in Dallas. Amell was there as a guest doing a Q&A when Stardust showed up, in costume, and threw a glass of water in Amell's face. The angle was originally planned to take place last month at a wrestling convention in New Jersey, but the blizzard forced cancellation of that event. Amell looked good for a non-wrestler in working a tag match with Neville and Stardust & Barrett at SummerSlam this past year

While Cesaro was in Germany this past week doing media and appearing at the WWE house shows, he said that he would not be able to make it back after shoulder surgery for WrestleMania. He also did media in the United Arab Emirates promoting the April shows in Dubai. He said that he was given a probable six month timetable before returning after surgery, which took place on 11/23, so we are looking at an estimate of late May for his return. He said rehab is going well. Regarding the retirement of Danielson, he said, "Yes, it was definitely a shock. I was hoping it was not true at first. It makes you very sad as Bryan was a good friend of mine. I have known him for over ten years and you do not want to see that happen to one of your friends. But I am very happy he was able to end it on his terms.

Cole replaced Ranallo in working with Saxton and Lawler on the Smackdown show taped on 2/16 in Ontario, CA. Ranallo came to the building, but had the flu, and the decision was made to send him home

That spot at the Royal Rumble show where Flair kissed Lynch, which got a lot of criticism after the fact, is one WWE seemingly had second thoughts on. They have edited off the show in replays on the WWE Network

Cena will also be the honorary Pace Car Driver at the Daytona 500 Spring Cub Series race on 2/21, which airs on FOX

Lawler did a pro-Donald Trump for President tweet pushing people in New Hampshire to vote for him in the primary and the local media, both the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and the WMC News reported he got death threats for it. Lawler has since said that sending out the tweet probably wasn't the best idea and that he was going to stay out of politics

Added to the 3/7 WWE Network special from Toronto will be a Highlight Reel segment with the New Day

They had a tryout camp this past week. The most notable names were Tony Nese and ROH's Cedric Alexander, who is not under contract. Most of the names, including those two, were brought in were people being tried out for the cruiserweight television series. There were also several guys who aren't well known from indies, with the only other names we heard being Alex Hammerstone of Paragon Pro Wrestling and Northeast independent wrestlers Chris Payne and David MacIntosh. There were also a lot of women getting tryouts, the most notable name being Deonna Purrazzo, who of late has worked NXT, TNA and ROH

Another interesting name was Roy Sims, only because he doesn't look anything like someone I'd think WWE would be interested in, as he's 6-foot-5 and 375 pounds, built like if Tank Abbott was six inches taller and at his most out of shape. Sims is from Hollister, CA, not far from here, and is a sumo who has competed in Japan. He was a 6-foot-5 300 pound high school defensive lineman who briefly played at Fresno State and some other colleges. He played some arena football, including a failed tryout with the San Jose Sabrecats. He then tried MMA and went 2-0 in amateur fights as a super heavyweight. He was working as a technology technician at San Benito High School when he started sumo a year ago, placing third in the U.S. Sumo open and then first at the U.S. Sumo Nationals in his first year in the sport

Rosa Mendes, (Milena Roucka, 36), gave birth to her first child, a baby girl named Jordan Elizabeth Schubenski on 2/13. Jordan weighed six pounds and 13 ounces. The father is Bobby Schubenski, who proposed to Roucka on an episode of "Total Divas" where they flew everyone to France for the proposal

On the Jericho vs. Styles match on the 2/11 Smackdown show, I'd give it ***3/4 and what a difference Ranallo and a newly motivated Lawler make to calling a match. Jericho won clean with the codebreaker, which was Styles' first loss. Apparently that was an improvised finish. The spot right before the finish where Styles fell on the top rope after Jericho tripped him up when Styles was trying a springboard move was supposed to be the finish. But the refs are instructed to call it as a shoot and the ref waved it off because apparently one of Jericho's legs was under the plane of the ropes. It's something nobody would have noticed at all but that's the current rules of officiating, but they pretty seamlessly went to the codebreaker from there. I'd have told the story differently, because I think the program as its most legs with Jericho as the subtle heel. But if they've got long-term plans for Jericho as a face, then he shouldn't be a heel. But rather than 50/50 booking, I'd like

to have seen either Jericho win with a very subtle heel tactic where you don't know if it's a fluke or he just cheated (and the original finish was supposed to be closer to that), giving him the excuse something happened, or Styles winning and it adding to Jericho's frustrations and builds to a heel turn in a match down the line

It looks like, thankfully, they killed off the "Redneck Rookie" nickname for Styles. In an interview on the show, he said he was proud to be a redneck but he's no rookie

Lawler announced on 2/14 that he was looking to open a wrestling-themed bar and grille on Beale Street in Memphis. Lawler wouldn't elaborate more on the subject as far as plane went

The WWE will be releasing a Scott Hall DVD in July, which will include a long interview with Hall discussing his career and his drug issues, as well as his attempts to get his life back on track to help his son embark on a career

Kevin Von Erich said he was going to WrestleMania. It makes sense since they are in Dallas and the Von Erich family were the top stars in Dallas from when Fritz returned home in the mid-60s until Kerry died and Kevin quit wrestling in the early 90s. It's also possible he could be asked to induct The Freebirds into the Hall of Fame

John Layfield will be taping "Legends with JBL" shows on the WWE Network soon with Booker T, Michael Hayes and Jimmy Hart

The WWE Network is also bringing back "Swerved" on 6/6 for a second season

The annual Australia tour was announced as 8/11 in Melbourne, 8/12 in Adelaide and 8/13 in Sydney back at the Allphones Arena

Ref Scott Armstrong had his rental car smashed and broken into and his backpack stolen while working the Smackdown tapings on 2/9 in Portland

Notes on the 2/15 Raw show in Anaheim. They had the first Raw sellout of the year drawing just over 11,900 fans to the Pond. It felt like a go-home show for a pretty dead secondary PPV. There was an attempt to build Charlotte vs. Brie Bella with a long interview segment, and build tension with Reigns and Ambrose throughout the show. The crowd was dead for a lot and even without the Grammys, that third hour was going to be tough as the only thing they were building was Show vs. Strowman. For Superstars, Natalya beat Fox via submission with the sharpshooter and Swagger beat Fandango with the Patriot lock. Raw opened with Ambrose out. Ambrose called the main event at Fast Lane "brother vs. brother vs beast." He said that when the biggest bully on the playground comes after you, sometimes you have to get your fingernails dirty. He called out Lesnar, even though Lesnar wasn't there. Stephanie instead came out and told Ambrose about last week, saying not only couldn't he get the job done against Lesnar, but he had to rely on his brother, Reigns, to come out to distract him so he could hit Lesnar with a cheap shot low blow. Stephanie then asked if people wanted to see Ambrose get F-5'd tonight. Loud cheers. Wonder if they were expecting that? Stephanie said F-5 tonight means fatal-five-way for the IC title. She said that if Reigns interferes, that you'll be disqualified. That wasn't explained well. The idea was that if Reigns interfered, then Ambrose would be out of the Fast Lane main event. The idea was that Ambrose going against four guys, that the odds were he's losing his title. Reigns can help Ambrose keep his title and in doing so, Ambrose will be out of the main event due to that interference, so Reigns can help him keep his

title and help himself eliminate a possible block to his getting the Mania shot. And no, it wasn't explained anywhere near that well. Owens won the title in the five-way over Ambrose, Breeze, Stardust and Ziggler in 12:33. The key is that Reigns never came out nor interfered. This was the best match on the show. Owens used cannonballs in the corner on Ambrose, Stardust and Ziggler. He went for a fourth one to Breeze, but Breeze instead superkicked him and hit the beauty shot for a near fall. The finish saw Ziggler used the Zig Zag on Stardust. Breeze threw Ambrose out of the ring and Owens power bombed Breeze and pinned him to win it. After the match, Ambrose was being interviewed by Renee Young. He said that The Authority think they've taken everything away from him, but instead they've given him more inspiration and motivation and dedication to win the main event at Fast Lane. He said that he would then face HHH in the main event at WrestleMania. Renee Young then interviewed Owens. Owens told her that he had told her he was going to win the title back from Ambrose. He told Young to say that he was right. Before she could say anything, Ziggler came out and congratulated him. Owens told him to get out of his spotlight. Ziggler asked for a title shot, noting he's beaten Owens the past two weeks. Owens turned him down. So later in the show, with no explanation, the match was announced. They announced a Cutting Edge segment with Edge & Christian interviewing the New Day at Fast Lane, so no tag team title match. The New Day did an interview. Kingston talked about Edge & Christian, saying that you don't bring a kazoo to a trombone fight. Woods asked what Edge & Christian would bring next, a piccolo or a recorder? Big E started talking about Coldplay playing at the Super Bowl but the other two put their hands over his mouth before he said Super Bowl. They pointed out that term is trademarked. Then they talked about Henry walking out on them. They said Henry could have been the world's strongest unicorn, but instead he's the world's largest booty hole. Henry came out for his match with E. E won in 4:31. Henry is moving very slow these days. He missed a charge and E put him on his shoulder for the big ending. Henry just fell off, got hurt and was pinned. The finish looked bad and the cameras quickly panned away from the trainers all attending to Henry. Brie Bella came out for an interview. There were "Daniel Bryan" chants, but fairly light. She talked about how all the love from the fans has turned a bad situation into something positive. Charlotte and Ric Flair came out. Ric never said a word, just stood next to his daughter and laughed. Boy do they need to get rid of that butterfly vagina belt. I mean, I always notice it but for some reason when they try and present this as a more meaningful title than before, it looks even more ridiculous. Charlotte said she understood if Brie wanted to forfeit the match at Fast Lane, because most women would want to be home with their husband at a time like this. He's just lost everything, his childhood dream, his career, and Charlotte said she kinds of thinks it's selfish that Brie is still wrestling right now, "but who am I to judge your marriage." Charlotte made a crack about Brie supporting Bryan 100 percent, and made it clear she meant that he's out of work so she is supporting the family and that she's still here because they need the money. Charlotte said "I'm on your side." She said she's all for Brie being home with Daniel, and being home to help Nikki with her physical therapy. Then she and Daniel can open up a bed and breakfast and be the good sister and good wife that she knows she is. She said that she doesn't need Brie, and the fans don't need Brie right now, but who does need her are her husband and her sister. Brie said that Charlotte is scared and is throwing her husband and sister in her face because she knows "I'm not an easy beat." Isn't that "I'm not an easy win?" Charlotte made a remark about her going home and having goat faced vegan babies and that led to a fight. Brie started throwing kicks and Ric pulled Charlotte out of the ring. Styles beat Miz in 11:50 with the calf crusher. Jericho was doing commentary. He was easily the best announcer on the show.

Match was good. Styles kicked out of the Skull crushing finale before coming back to win via submission. During the match, Miz accidentally poked Styles in the left eye. By Smackdown, Styles' left eye was swollen pretty bad. Styles did a promo on Jericho, saying that Jericho got his win on Smackdown, but it's eating up "the great Chris Jericho that he was beaten by me in my first WWE match." Styles wanted a third match to decide it. Jericho said it's a phenomena idea and said, "It sounds like they want to see this match." The crowd reaction was lukewarm actually. Jericho then said, "I'm not sure if I want to wrestle you again." Jericho said he'd let him know on Thursday. The Dudleys came out. Devon pulled a table out from under the ring, and then symbolically put it back under the ring. They've ditched the glasses and Bubba is morphing closer to his TNA character, which is a good thing, as they are much better for right now as heels. They called out the Usos, who never came out. They were selling on TV that the Usos were injured and not there, but they actually came out later after Raw ended. The Dudleys pushed that they are not a nostalgia act on a farewell tour, and they are not two relics from the past. They said they were still the baddest tag team on the planet. Then they said the tables were gone forever, and if people wanted to see them using tables they have to go to the WWE Network and watch their old matches. They pushed being nine-time WWE tag team champions, instead of the 20 plus number they'd usually claim when you include other promotions. Summer Rae pinned Paige in 3:41 with a cradle. The crowd was dead. It felt like they were trying to find some role for Summer now that she's no longer with Breeze. Heyman came out and called out Reigns. Heyman told Reigns that he can't get by his beast, nor can Ambrose. He told a story that Reigns promised his daughter he'd bring home the title but to do so he'll have to beat his best friend, so he has to choose between his daughter and his brother. He said that some people in the business will choose their best friend over their family and they end up in divorce court. But those who choose family sit in the locker room by themselves. But he said Lesnar stands in Reigns' way. Reigns stayed cool and just said, "You're good, thank you," and shook his hand. He complimented Heyman, saying that his speech was refreshing, that nobody says what they're thinking right to another man's face and that Heyman made good points, talked about choices and paying the price and he made a choice a long time ago and he's willing to pay the price. He said he and Ambrose don't have problems, they've fought before and they'll fight again and he beat him before and it wasn't easy. He said he's never beaten Lesnar, but he has beat his ass. He vowed to win the title, shook hands with Heyman a second time, which is notable, and left. At this point the Dudleys attacked Reigns. Reigns fought back but they had him on the ground until Ambrose ran in. Reigns came back and hit the Superman punch on Devon. Bubba then backed off. Ambrose then went for the Dirty Deeds on Reigns, and Reigns blocked it. Reigns looked shocked, but Ambrose pointed to the WrestleMania sign as if to say it's everyone for themselves to get in the Mania main event. Reigns smiled and they fist bumped. The fans heavily booed that fist bump. They announced that next week they will be awarding the Vincent J. McMahon (Vince's father) Legacy of Excellent Award on Raw, saying this will be the highest honor ever given to someone in WWE. Slater pinned Ryder in 2:06 when Dallas distracted Ryder and Slater pinned him after a superkick ad implant DDT. Next was a segment with R-Truth on a date with a woman in a fancy restaurant. Goldust showed up as the waiter. They had some silly banter back and forth including a line about "We're not in your house," and Goldust shot back that it's not 1997 (In Your House was the name given to B PPV shows in the 90s that didn't draw well). Goldust was offering the two champagne on the house but had trouble opening the bottle. He held the bottle and shook it with the idea it was him climaxing as the champagne went all over the woman's dress. The two of them are

actually quite good in their back-and-forth, but the scripting of these segments have been horrible. Sheamus & Rusev & Del Rio beat Sin Cara & Neville & Kalisto in 9:15. There was a great spot where Neville and Kalisto did simultaneous moonsaults off the top rope to the floor while at the same time Sin Cara did a flip dive. Sin Cara later did another tope on Del Rio. The finish saw Sin Cara tangled in the ropes. It looked terrible because Sin Cara had to literally grab the ropes to hold on to stay in position for a long period of time while Del Rio climbed to the top rope and did the double foot stomp. They did a nice Booker T video in conjunction with it being Black History Month. They showed an angle where Lynch arrived at the building and was confronted by Tamina and Naomi. Tamina kicked Lynch in the face and left her laying. The League of Nations were out for a promo. Del Rio said that Kalisto's wins over him were a fluke and wanted a 2/3 fall match. Lynch beat Naomi in 2:02. They showed Marina Shafir, Jessamyn Duke and Shayna Baszler of the Four Horsewomen in the front row during this match. Naomi did Speedball Mike Bailey's repeated kicks spot that always gets over, although people here didn't know what to make of it. After some reverses, Lynch got the submission with the disarmer. Naomi & Tamina double-teamed Lynch after the match. Banks came out, but she was in heels. She walked to the ring and took her time when it was a save, including standing there and taking her earrings off. Naomi & Tamina first stopped, but it looked stupid them standing there, so they went back on the attack until Banks ran in and they left. Main event saw Show beat Strowman via DQ in 2:29. Show suplexed him and Rowan interfered for the DQ. Show speared Rowan. The entire Wyatt family beat down Show. Ryback then did a run in. This was weird as Ryback was confronted on the floor by Harper. I'm guessing he was supposed to pick Harper up and drive him into the post or something, but Harper was high and went over the top and held on. Ryback then took it exactly like you'd take a sunset flip on the floor, which was really out of place. Ryback then laid him out. The Wyatt Family got the edge on Show & Ryback until Kane came from under the ring and they had a brawl, ending when Show & Kane did a double choke slam on Harper. After Raw ended, Reigns & Ambrose came out and challenged the Dudleys to a match. Instead, The New Day came out. All five guys started brawling until the Dudleys then came out to help the New Day. The Usos then made the save for Reigns & Ambrose and all the heels left except Woods got left behind. The faces bounced him around and the show ended with Reigns spearing Woods

Notes from the 2/16 Smackdown tapings in Ontario, CA. The show drew 7,000 fans, which is above usual for Smackdown. Darren Young pinned Fandango in a dark match. For Main Event, Neville & Ryder beat Stardust & Breeze when Neville pinned Stardust after the red arrow. Paige pinned Summer Rae in the 50/50 booking match using the Rampage. The Social Outcasts came out and complained that the New Day isn't defending the titles on the PPV. New Day beat Rose & Slater & Axel when Woods pinned Axel. The opener saw Del Rio & Sheamus & Rusev beat Lucha Dragons & Ziggler. Owens was out on commentary. Barrett was watching at ringside. Owens interfered and that set up Sheamus pinning Ziggler with the Zig Zag. Banks beat Tamina in a short match with the Bank statement. After the match, Naomi & Tamina both attacked Banks. Lynch made the save for her. Lynch then tried to help Banks up, but Banks shoved her away. But backstage Banks & Lynch got on the same page. Jericho came out and said he was going to give Styles his answer about a third match. He said he wants Styles out so he can say it to his face. But instead, Miz came out. Miz said he's tired of Jericho and Styles. Jericho told Miz that he needs to retire and Miz said he'd never retire in a place like the Inland Empire. This led to a match and

Jericho beat Miz with the Walls of Jericho. Jericho again called out Styles. Jericho then told Styles he was turning down a third match because he doesn't want Styles to make a name off beating him. Styles then attacked Jericho and used the KENTA series. Jericho then got back on the apron and said that was a stupid move and accepted the challenge. Ambrose had a backstage meeting with Heyman. Heyman noted that Lesnar was here and he's looking for Ambrose. The New Day did an interview building up their interview on Sunday with Edge & Christian. Think about that for a second. Charlotte beat Natalya in a non-title match with the figure eight. Charlotte beat her down after until Brie Bella made the save. Charlotte went for the figure eight, but Brie blocked it and gave her a series of kicks while the place chanted "Yes." There was another R-Truth and Goldust segment. The Wyatt family was out doing a promo for their match on Sunday. Ambrose & Reigns beat The Dudleys via DQ. Crowd was really into Ambrose. Lesnar came out and attacked Ambrose & Reigns for the DQ. Reigns and Ambrose both got the better of Lesnar until Reigns went for the spear, but Lesnar moved and he laid out Ambrose. Ambrose got up and went for Dirty Deeds on Reigns, but blocked it and hit a Samoan drop on Ambrose. Lesnar threw Reigns into Ambrose and laid out Reigns with an F-5. The show ended with HHH coming out and standing on the stage looking at Lesnar. After the match, Reigns & Ambrose called the Dudleys out to finish what they started. They had a short brawl with Reigns & Ambrose cleaning house

Notes on the 2/10 NXT TV show. This was the first show from Royal Rumble weekend at the University of Central Florida and in front of 5,500 people instead of the usual 400 people. They opened with Baron Corbin pinning Johnny Gargano in 5:56. What's notable is this was a much larger crowd than usual and it was Gargano, who works the area for Evolve with no TV, and has mostly been used as enhancement talent on NXT, that the crowd reacted to as a star as opposed to the more pushed Corbin. He got a huge pop coming out, all the chants were "Johnny Wrestling," and nothing negative or positive for Corbin. The size difference between the two did look visually ridiculous. There was a "Morgan Freeman" chant during the match as well. Gargano looked good, with his best move being a spear through the ropes from the apron into the ring. He got a good near fall from a superkick until he lost to the End of Days. It was good. Sami Zayn did an interview talking about his match "next week" with Samoa Joe. He said his initial reaction was disappointment that he wasn't getting the shot at Finn Balor and had to beat Joe. But he said winning the title for the first time was difficult so he figures winning it a second time will be as well. He pushed he'd become the first two-time NXT champion. Mojo Rawley & Zack Ryder beat John Skyler & Corey Hollis in 3:28 when Rawley used the pounce on Skyler and they finished Skyler with a double-team Hype Rider. Just a typical television match. Bayley and Carmella did an interview together. They talked about being best friends. Carmella said that this was the biggest match of her career and she wasn't sure if she'd get another shot. They made a point to say they were going into the match as best friends and coming out of it as best friends, and shook hands. Alexa Bliss pinned Cameron with the Sparkle splash in 4:13. When Cameron came out, fans just started booing. It's not as bad as Eva Marie, but people see her as a pretty girl who can't wrestle, as that's passe today. Fans were chanting "Cameron sucks" and not because she was a heel. Cameron did work as the heel even though Bliss is usually a heel. Enzo & Cass did an interview wanting another shot at Dash & Dawson. They also talked about how they were the NXT tag team of the year and were going to make it two in a row. Jason Jordan & Chad Gable came out and they were going to win it this year because it's an Olympic year. Elias Samson pinned Jesse Sorensen in 2:37

with a neckbreaker. Nothing much to that. Apollo Crews was interviewed about his loss to Finn Balor. He was asked, since he lost, does he regret asking for the match. He said he wanted a resolution and he gave it everything he had. He said he now knows what it means to be the best and knows what he has to do to get there and vowed there would be a new Apollo Crews. Main event was Bayley beating Carmella in the women's title match. Carmella was in tears before the match started just being in the ring in such a big singles match. It was easily the best match she's ever had. Not great, but certainly good. She did two topes and a face plant into a triangle, but Bayley escaped the triangle with a backslide. They traded cradles back and forth until Bayley got the pin in 10:33. The two hugged when it was over and Carmella was crying again. Bayley was in the ring as Carmella left. Nia Jax and Eva Marie attacked Carmella which got super heat. The one thing about an angle, is when people are watching it and seeing bullshit fake wrestling and you do an angle, they halfass respond or if they respond it's that "it's pro wrestling response." People were in the real mode, because they knew Bayley and Carmella were best friends, saw them hug, saw the way they were presented (they were standing side by side during the intros as opposed to being in different corners which was a great touch) and in the post-match saw it as a real moment. Then, when heels break up a real moment instead of a bullshit moment, there is heat, unless they do so in a dumb way in which case it's just a negative. They beat down Carmella and then when Bayley tried to save, beat her down as well. Jax head-butted Bayley and gave Carmella two legdrops. Asuka came out and Eva Marie hid behind Jax. Asuka got in Jax's face but Eva Marie and Jax walked off. Asuka then gave Bayley a look and teased going after the belt. The show ended with Joe doing an interview for the match with Zayn

There were three NXT weekend shows. The first was on 2/11 in Jacksonville, before a sellout of 250 fans. The big thing on the show was a injury to Riddick Moss in the main event. It was Moss & Dash Wilder & Scott Dawson vs. Sami Zayn & Enzo Amore & Big Cass. The faces did a triple suplex spot and Moss couldn't get up. They had to stop the match. Moss didn't move for a long time. It was about ten to 15 minutes with the medics working on him and people were really concerned as he wasn't moving, before Zayn got on the mic and said he was going to be okay. Fans were chanting his name. He walked out on his own but EMTs were waiting for him as soon as he got to the curtain. While he was on his back, Dawson broke character and talked to the crowd about how the wrestlers put their bodies on the line and injuries happen. Fans started chanting "We love you guys" when it became clear Moss was conscious and was going to be able to get up. Dawson after all this cut another face promo, shook hands with Enzo & Zayn, and then tried to jump them so they could do a spot to send the fans home happy, as Enzo & Zayn laid out Dash & Dawson with the rocket launcher and Helluva kick. It was an idea to end the show with a happy ending but it came off awkward and contrived. Aside from the problem in the main event, it was said to be a great show, in particular the performances of Asuka, and a tag match with Jordan & Gable vs. The Vaudevillains. The opener saw Rawley & Ryder beat Blake & Murphy. Samson pinned Tough enough's Patrick Clark. Liv Morgan pinned Adrienne Reese with a moonsault. Levis Valenzuela Jr. pinned Steve Cutler in a comedy match. Jordan & Gable beat The Vaudevillains. Apollo Crews pinned Tino Sabbatelli. Asuka beat Bliss with the Asuka lock and then came the main event

The Tamps show on 2/12 drew a sellout of 500 fans and featured the first-ever singles match with Zayn vs. Manny Andrade (La Sombra), which was said to be the best singles match at a house show in recent memory. Ryder & Rawley beat Gzim Selmani & Sunny Dhinsa in a quick match. Selmani

is a former MMA fighter who fought in Bellator as a big heavyweight and Dhinsa was the Canadian Olympic prospect. Sabbatelli beat Alexander Wolfe. Peyton Royce beat Aliyah via submission. Riley pinned Clark. Fans were into Clark more than most of the guys who aren't on television. Clark was the face and they gave him some good offense. Enzo & Cass & Carmella beat Blake & Murphy & Bliss using the rocket launcher for the finish. Zayn pinned Andrade with the Helluva kick. The two hugged after the match. Nia Jax pinned Reese in a short match that wasn't good. Jordan & Gable beat Dash & Dawson in

a non-title match main event. Good long match with Gable pinning Dawson with the double-team back suplex

The 2/13 show in Palatka, FL, drew 150 fans. Knox pinned Fulton with a sunset flip. Kids are into Knox's party boy dancing. Carmella pinned Royce with a triangle. Samson pinned Knight. Crews pinned Riley in a good back-and-forth match. Enzo & Cass beat The Vaudevillains with the rocket launcher finish. Valenzuela pinned Dawkins with a knockout punch. Bayley pinned Liv Morgan in a babyface vs. babyface style title match with the Bayley-to-belly. Dash & Dawson beat Rawley & Ryder in a title match by pinning Rawley. .. The Reigns tour was in Germany this week. The 2/10 show in Bremen drew 6,500. We didn't get the attendance figures for the rest of the tour. The other tour was headlined by Jericho vs. Wyatt and opened on 2/13 drawing 6,500 in Fresno. Fresno is usually a good wrestling city but that was a great crowd considering the depth on the card. We should put an asterisk by that great card for lack of depth because all the local advertising as late as the day of the show, both on television and radio, pushed the show around Reigns defending the WWE title against Sheamus. Obviously Reigns lost the title weeks ago, Reigns was pulled from Fresno for Germany to replace Cena a long time ago, and Sheamus has been injured for a few weeks. 2/14 in Bakersfield drew 4,000

The tour started in Bremen with Usos & Show over New Day. Cesaro, who was brought over for the tour, doing an interview every night, came out after the first match and really just plugged the main event, which was Reigns vs. Del Rio in a street fight every night. Swagger beat Breeze with the Patriot lock. Charlotte pinned Paige for the Divas title with Summer Rae as referee. Ric Flair was on the tour in Charlotte's corner. Summer Rae played heel ref, and when Paige had the match won, she hit the mat for two and then pretended her hand was hurting. Ambrose kept the IC title pinning Owens. That was said to be the best match on the show. Goldust pinned Dallas in ten seconds. Dallas then claimed he wasn't ready, and wanted another match. R-Truth came out and pinned Dallas in five seconds. It was noted they did this exact same bit the last time they were in Germany. Ziggler pinned Rusev, who had Lana in his corner. Reigns pinned Del Rio with a spear through a table. A lot of people were off on timing because they left Seattle right after Raw and flew straight to Amsterdam, and then flew from there to Bremen, and basically had to perform shortly after arriving in town, so they had to battle jet lag. During the Ziggler vs. Rusev match, the fans started a chant about how the Hamburg first division soccer team was shit. Rusev then asked the fans to sing it to Lana. Show got a huge ovation. The New Day talked in German and insulted the fans, which got them good heat

.Cologne was a different show. Ziggler pinned Owens in the opener with a superkick. Cesaro announced Reigns vs. Del Rio in a Cologne street fight would headline. Swagger beat Dallas in 10:00. Crowd didn't react to either guy. Goldust pinned Breeze in 2:00 and the Breeze did the bit

about wanting anyone in the back to come out. R-Truth pinned him in five seconds. Ambrose pinned Rusev with a roll-up in 15:00. The crowd was chanting for Lana during the match but she insulted them. Same Charlotte vs. Paige match, same Usos & Show over New Day match with show once again getting a rel big reaction and Reigns again pinned Del Rio with a spear through the table

Mannheim was a mix of the two shows. It was mostly the Cologne show except Swagger beat Breeze with the Patriot lock and it was Dallas who did the two quick losses, one to Goldust in about a minute and the other to R-Truth in about ten seconds.

Magdeburg saw the same show except they had Swagger beating Dallas and Breeze losing in one minute to Goldust and ten seconds to R-Truth

The other tour opened in Fresno. Styles beat Miz with the calf crusher. Once again, Styles got the biggest reaction of anyone on the show. It's really telling when you get house show reports and it used to be Jericho and now it's Miz, that unless you've got Cena on the show, gets the biggest reaction. I think the key must be that the less you're on TV, the more over you are. Well, or if you're not on TV much but also pretty good. Dudleys beat Slater & Rose with a 3-D. Dudleys worked as faces even though they turned on Raw. Corbin won a three-way over Fandango and Viktor. Fandango worked as the face. Kane & Neville beat Harper & Rowan when Kane choke slammed Harper and Neville hit the red arrow for the pin. Banks & Natalya & Lynch beat Naomi & Cameron & Tamina. Cameron returned to the main roster as the third member of Team Bad. Banks made Naomi submit to the bank statement. Lucha Dragons beat Los Matadores in a good match. Main event saw Jericho pin Wyatt. Good match. Strowman was at ringside. Jericho did his regular moves and Wyatt kicked out. Strowman distracted Jericho, Wyatt charged, Jericho moved and Wyatt knocked Strowman off the apron and Jericho hit the codebreaker for the pin. It's weird in a sense that the guy who they are wanting to be a top guy who has the least experience and most needs the ring time is booked on a weekend tour to stand on the apron

Bakersfield was the exact same show. Styles once again the most over guy. Dudleys again as faces. The Corbin vs. Viktor vs. Fandango match was boring. Kane & Neville vs. Harper & Rowan was good. Cameron didn't look anywhere close to the level of the other women in her match. Lucha Dragons vs. Matadores was good. Nobody cared about Matadores but they liked the Lucha Dragons.